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Once Upon a Time, in Dallas

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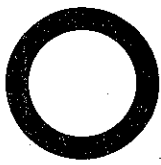
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Once Upon a Time, in Dallas

Abstract

American television programmes manage to cross cultural and linguistic frontiers with great ease. This phenomenon is so taken for granted that hardly any systematic research has been done to explain the reasons why these programmes are successful or, even more fundamentally, whether and how such quintessentially American products are understood. The often heard assertion that this phenomenon is part of a process of cultural imperialism presumes, first, that there is an American message in the content or the form; second, that this message is somehow perceived by viewers; and, third, that it is perceived in the same way by viewers in different cultures.



ONCE UPON A TIME, IN DALLAS

Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes

American television programmes manage to cross cultural and linguistic frontiers with great ease. This phenomenon is so taken for granted that hardly any systematic research has been done to explain the reasons why these programmes are successful or, even more fundamentally, whether and how such quintessentially American products are understood. The often-heard assertion that this phenomenon is part of a process of cultural imperialism presumes, first, that there is an American message in the content or the form; second, that this message is somehow perceived by viewers; and, third, that it is perceived in the same way by viewers in different cultures.

Perhaps such programmes are only little understood. American television programmes are aired as a by-product of the purchase of American television technology – equipment, maintenance and programmes all arrive in the same package – and the viewers are satisfied to watch the lavish, action-packed productions without paying much attention to their meanings. Alternatively, one might suggest that the programmes are, in fact, understood thanks to certain of their attributes. It might be said that they contain superficial stories; stereotyped characters; visualised conflict, involving action and violence; rapid pacing; and much repetition.

But this cannot be the whole story. One cannot so easily dismiss a programme like *Dallas* as superficial or action-packed. In fact, at least as far as kinship structure is concerned, the story might be considered quite complex. Neither can it be understood without words; there is very little self-explanatory action. How then does the viewer from another culture understand it?

UNIVERSAL THEMES

The answer arises from that segment of communications theory and research which asserts that viewing is an active and social process. Viewing takes place at home and, in most countries, is done in the presence of family and friends. During and after the programme, people discuss what they have seen, and come to collective understandings. These understandings draw on a variety of interpretive tools. First of all, there are deep structures – universal themes – such as kinship relations or ideas about relations between id and superego which people find applicable. Secondly, viewers selectively perceive, interpret and evaluate the programme in terms of local cultures and personal experiences, selectively incorporating it into their minds and lives. This can be done in a variety of ways: by an affirmation or negation of the story, for example, or through identification with a character, or some more critical judgement.

We are suggesting, in other words, that television programmes do not impose themselves unequivocally on passive viewers. The 'reading' of a TV programme is a process of negotiation between the story on the screen and the culture of the viewers, and it takes place in interaction among the viewers themselves.

To observe these processes in action, we have undertaken a programme of empirical research. We assembled 50 groups of three couples each – an initial

couple invites two others from among their friends – to view an episode from the second session of *Dallas*, and to discuss it with us afterwards. These focus groups were of lower-middle class, with high school education or less, and ethnically homogenous. There were ten groups each of Israeli Arabs, new immigrants to Israel from Russia, first and second generation immigrants from Morocco, and kibbutz members. Taking these groups as a microcosm of the worldwide audience of *Dallas*, we are comparing their 'readings' of the programme with ten groups of matched Americans in Los Angeles. The discussion following the programme takes approximately one hour and is guided by a rather open interview guide for focus groups. The discussion is recorded, and it is followed by a brief individual questionnaire that asks participants to indicate whether and with whom they normally view and discuss the programme.

If we are correct in our assumption about the social process of reading *Dallas*, the method we have chosen enables us to simulate and 'sample' the high moments of this process. The post-discussion questionnaire, as well as a preliminary inspection of some of the protocols, provide evidence that the programme is viewed in the company of others and is widely discussed; there are repeated allusions in the focus groups to such discussions. Of course, we cannot prove that interpretation is altogether dependent on such interaction, or precisely how pervasive every day television talk might be. Even if we have overstated the 'necessary' and pervasive aspects of such interaction, the method of focus group discussion provides a very close look at the social dynamics of meaning-making. People seem to express themselves very freely.

Of course, it is true that the statement of any individual in a group may be influenced by the statements – even the presence – of the others, and may well be different from what it might have been in a personal interview. But that's the point: if our assumption about the normality of the social reading of television is correct, it is precisely these group-influenced thoughts and statements in which we are interested.

Two other caveats need to be mentioned. This particular study cannot provide a conclusive answer to the question of whether American programmes are read with greater ease than programmes from other countries. Nor can we generalise easily from *Dallas*, or its genre, to other American genres. So we cannot say with certainty that *Kojak* or *I Love Lucy* are processed in similar ways, cognitively or socially. These questions require complex and costly comparative research for which we are not yet prepared. What we are doing is complicated enough. We are attempting to sample the interaction of small groups of different languages and cultures during and after the viewing of a television programme that has been imported from outside their own culture and language, in an effort to identify the ways in which meaning and possible relevance is ascribed to the programme.

A different way of stating our problem is to say that we are interested in the critical apparatus martialled by

lower-middle class groups of varying ethnicity while sitting in front of the television screen. Again, we find ourselves in the midst of an almost unspoken debate over the activity level of television viewers and their conceptual powers. Most scholars and critics don't seem to give the common viewer much credit; yet, occasional research and some theories suggest that there is a native critical ability possessed even by the most unschooled viewer. One recent empirical study dares to suggest that lower-class viewers may be *more* articulate than well-educated ones in analysing popular television programmes.¹

If we restate our basic concern in these terms, we are asking, in effect, how the viewer analyses content or performs his own structural analysis of a programme like *Dallas*. The group discussions, then, may be analysed as ethno-semiological data, in which the readings of the viewers may be compared to critics and scholars who have analysed the programme. Since the effects attributed to a TV programme are often inferred from content analysis alone, it is of particular interest to examine the extent to which members of the audience absorb, explicitly or implicitly, the messages which critics and scholars allege that they are receiving.

However one approaches the problematics of the study, we are, in effect, asking two basic questions: how do viewers make sense of *Dallas*?; and does viewer understanding differ in different cultures? To translate these questions into research operations, we ask, first of all, what happened in the episode, inviting group members to address the narrative sequence and the topics, issues and themes with which the programme deals.²

We pay particular attention to the ways in which these issues are discussed. For example, *Dallas* raises value questions about family life, living by the rules, loyalty, money vs happiness, civilisation vs 'the frontier', the invasion of the family by business, and vice versa. Which of these issues will be raised in the group discussion, and what concepts will be invoked to discuss them? Are these concepts taken from: universal forms (deep structures)? Tradition? Personal experience? TV genres?

We are also interested in viewers' perceptions of the message of the programme. Do they perceive that the programme proposes a correlation – positive or negative – between money and happiness? Do they agree that business is destroying the family, or vice versa? Do they feel that the programme takes sides between the id and the superego? Do they feel that the programme is about American decadence or American ascendance?

In addition to the analysis of issues and messages, we ask a second sort of question: how much 'critical distance' can be discerned between the group discussions and the television screen? Thus, some groups will 'gossip' about the characters as if they were real people, analysing their motivations in everyday terms. At the other extreme, certain groups will discuss attributes and actions as 'functions' in a dramatic formula, groping, as critics do, towards a definition of the genre to which *Dallas* belongs.³ At this level of how 'real' the characters and situations are thought to be, we ask whether they apply equally to all or only to 'them', or to who they are: Texans? Americans? First World?

Yet another level of analysis is embedded in the sequences of conversation. Can one perceive in the interchange among group members a direction – some 'progress' – toward a shared reading? Are there identifiable 'outcomes' in the course of mutual help in

understanding a character or an episode? Is there agreement or disagreement over whether an action is justified? Is there debate over whether a certain character or situation 'could happen here'? What are the patterns of such processes of consensus-building or meaning-making? It is too early for us to answer these questions definitively. Nevertheless, we wish to share some very preliminary observations about this social process of meaning-making based on impressions from a first reading of the Israeli cases.

TRACKING SUE ELLEN

First, let us look at an example of a statement which reflects the process of mutual aid in the making of meaning. During the viewing of the programme itself, group members fill in information for friends who missed the previous episode, remind each other about the past performances of certain characters who have been absent, explain motivations for actions, and prepare each other for a coming 'surprise' or 'unpleasantness'. Consider the case of an illiterate middle-aged Moroccan woman named Ziviah conversing with her fellow-group members, including her husband, her sister, her sister's husband and a friend:

- Salah*: [about Dusty]. 'It's not clear whether or not he can have children.'
- Miriam*: 'They talked about it in court [in the last episode].'
- Salah*: 'Why does she [Sue Ellen] live with him? That's strange.'
- Miriam*: 'Why? Because she's suffered enough. What do you mean, "why"?''
- Ziviah*: 'Where's their father? Why don't we ever see him?'
- Miriam*: 'I think the father is dead.'
- Ziviah*: 'That's what they say.'
- Zari*: 'He died a few weeks ago, and it hardly matters.'
- Ziviah*: [indicating the screen] 'That's Bobby's wife. She's dying to have a child.'
- Miriam*: 'No, she's in a mental hospital now.'
- Ziviah*: 'Oh yes, yes, that's right.'
- Yosef*: 'Really?'
- Ziviah*: 'Yes, yes.'
- Salah*: 'She's in a hospital now?'
- Miriam*: 'A mental hospital.'

But groups can reinforce each other not only in accurate exegesis of a text; they can also contribute cumulatively to a misreading. This process is particularly interesting when the distorted interpretation derives, apparently, from the attempt to incorporate a segment of the story into a familiar pattern of culture. Thus, in the following exchange, an Arabic group finds it culturally compatible to assume that Sue Ellen, having run away with the baby from her husband, JR, has returned to her father's home rather than to the home of her former lover and *his* father:

- George*: 'He's trying to monopolise all the oil in order to destroy Sue Ellen's father. He wants to use it to pressure . . .'
- William*: 'Sue Ellen's father.'
- Interviewer*: 'Sue Ellen's father? Is that right?'
- William*: 'Wasn't that Sue Ellen's father that was with him?'
- Hyam*: 'Yes, Sue Ellen's father; that's him.'
- Interviewer*: 'Where was Sue Ellen at the time?'
- Hyam*: 'She's staying at her father's.'



The previous example deals less with meaning, perhaps, and more with simple information. Let us look at an example of the way in which social interaction clarifies meaning. This is from a group of new immigrants from Russia, who know only a little of the English of the original and only a little more of the Hebrew of the subtitles. Yet here they are conversing in Russian, about Americans in Texas, on Israeli television. The issue is why the court gave custody of the baby to the mother, Sue Ellen, rather than to JR.

Liuba: 'Justice has a lot to do with it.'

Misha: 'What justice? It was the medical certificate [attesting to the impotence of the man with whom Sue Ellen is living] that helped, not justice.'

Mile: 'No, it's justice, not the medical certificate, that helped her to win.'

Sofia: 'It was proven that Sue Ellen left him not to go to another man but to a sick man whom she was going to help at a difficult moment, and that was the decisive factor in the court's decision.'

Misha: 'Nothing would have helped without the certificate.'

Mile: 'Misha, he's not potent, this new husband of hers.'

Liuba: 'She didn't go to a lover, but to . . .'

Mile: 'Remember, she can't have any more children. So it's justice.'

Misha: 'What justice? It's the medical certificate.'

Mile: 'You're wrong.'

All: 'You're wrong. It's about justice.'

Additionally, there are arguments about how things *should* have turned out. Some members of the group think well of the outcome of an issue raised in the programme, while others disagree. Thus the group also sits in judgement of the values of the programme, or at least brings its own values into open debate. Here is an example of this process from a group of Moroccan Jews, most of whom are already rather well integrated into Israeli society. The subject of this

conversation is why Miss Ellie refuses to be JR's accomplice in the kidnapping of the baby:

Zehava: 'She [Miss Ellie] knows how it feels to be a mother. If her own son were taken away how would she feel? She would feel it keenly. She doesn't want others to suffer that way.'

Yossi: 'You're talking as a mother. How about talking like a father?'

Zehava: 'That's my opinion, and that's what I said.

Let me explain to my husband. He's saying, "Why should the father be the only one to suffer? Why should we be defending only the mother?" My answer is that the mother gave birth to the child and suffered for him. She loves him better than the father because the child is of her flesh. A father is a father; ok, so he loves his child.'

Machluf: 'And not of his flesh? Isn't the father a partner in the child?'

Zehava: 'The child's from his seed, but not of his flesh.'

Machluf: 'What do you mean his seed and not his flesh?'

Zehava: 'It's not the same thing. She suffered at the time of birth, and not the father.'

Machluf: 'Don't they have half and half in the child . . .? In the government you [women, feminists] say you want 50%, but you really mean you want 75%.'

Another episode from this same group goes even further in questioning the wisdom of social arrangements for allocating and administering justice. Some members of the group insist that justice is too narrow in its focus. If only the judge had taken account of the whole of Sue Ellen's questionable past or the fact of her running off with the child, instead of focussing on her purity of soul, he would have awarded custody of the child to JR:

Yossi: 'The kind of justice we just saw is called dry



law. It's a kind of impersonal law, without people. Who says that the court had to decide that the child should stay with its mother? It's only a coincidence that her friend can't go to bed with her or give her a child. She shouldn't have been unfaithful, and the court shouldn't have given her custody of the child.'

Such arguments are not limited to taking sides over issues within the programme. A theme in the programme as a whole is sometimes interpreted or evaluated against an opposite position which is embedded in the culture of the viewing group. Thus, one of the members of this same Moroccan group spoke eloquently, in liturgical rhetoric, of how much he did not feel allied to the values of Dallas:

Machluf: 'You see I'm a Jew who wears a skullcap and I learned from this series to say "Happy is our lot, goodly is our fate" (*Psalms*) that we're Jewish. Everything about JR and his baby, who has maybe four or five fathers, who knows? The mother is Sue Ellen, of course, and the brother of Pam left, maybe he's the father . . . I see that they're almost all bastards . . .'

A similar sort of rejection of the perceived message of *Dallas* can be found in our kibbutz group:

Sarah A: 'When I see them, I only pity them.'

Amaliah: 'I live better than they do.'

Sarah A: 'And I tell myself, how terrible it would be if I were one of them.'

Amaliah: 'With all that they have money, my life style is higher than theirs.'

But rejection is by no means the universal reaction. The groups we have examined so far are not so quick as the two just cited to reject the material values in *Dallas*. Indeed, even the groups that do reject them at one point in the discussion may reconsider at some other point. More typical, perhaps, is the following

exchange from a group of North Africans in a semi-rural cooperative settlement:

Miriam: 'Money will get you anything. That's why people view it. People sit at home and want to see how it looks.'

Salah: 'These are special people. Somehow they get it all, and we don't.'

Ziviah: 'Right.'

Joseph: 'Everybody wants to be rich. Whatever he has, he wants more.'

Zari: 'Who doesn't want to be rich? The whole world does.'

Miriam: 'Wealth also makes an easy life.'

Ziviah: 'It's the best thing.'

It is clear from these examples that people are discussing and evaluating not only the issues of the Ewing family but the issues in their own lives. Indeed, much of the discussion in groups focuses on problems of conflict between the sexes, normative vs anomie family relations, money vs happiness, loyalty vs opportunism, and the like. Some of the discussants clearly use the programme to discuss themselves and their conflicts. Others do so less freely. This may turn out to be one of the important differences between the ethnic groups; namely, how much critical distance is maintained throughout the discussion. Here is an example of personal soulsearching triggered by the programme:

Sarah A: 'When they tried to kill him [JR], her behaviour was simply . . . I don't know what to call it. How could she, suddenly . . . ? It's true you feel guilty, so you worry about a person. But suddenly to love him? . . . That seems put on. So what? Because I feel guilty, I should suddenly sell myself, sell my personality?'

Consider the following – from a Russian group – in comparison:

Sima: 'I'm surprised by his [JR's] attitude to his father. He must be feeling that his father is superior to him financially, as a businessman. What we see in the course of the programme is that he is constantly telling his father, "Father don't worry, the boy will come home, don't worry, everything will be all right", as if he were giving a report to his father, as if he were bowing down to him.'

Marik: 'In my opinion, he has inferiority feelings toward his father . . .'

Misha: 'He's a very complex person . . . He has many contrasts. One can't say that such a person is very positive, although he does have certain positive qualities. I can't say that business for such a person, and his ambitions for achieving his goals, are negative. Without such qualities he couldn't work and make money, and making money is his profession.'

Marik: 'Agree.'

Sima: 'For him, everything is divided according to priorities, according to their importance. In business, let's say everything has to be organised. In a family, there has to be an heir. Everything as it should be.'

Interviewer: 'Do you mean without emotion?'

Sima: 'I wouldn't say without emotion. Maybe yes. It seems to me that he wants his son not because he loves him; he's not so devoted to him. He simply knows that's the way it should be. He knows that he's his father's heir. I believe that he's living according to his father's code.'

It is far too early to propose any sort of conclusions, even tentative ones. Nevertheless,

1. We are impressed by the sophisticated ways in which very common people discuss these stories. Clearly, they understand the broad outlines of the narrative; clearly they know the structure of the relations among the characters, their emotions and motivations, and are able to articulate at least some of the central themes.

2. There is evident selectivity in what is discussed. The importance of family far outweighs the importance of business, as we expected. Less sophisticated groups sometimes use kinship terms to identify the characters.

3. Issues discussed include 'success', 'loyalty', 'honour', 'money and happiness', sex roles, the functions of children, and many others. Topics raised in the programme are generalised in the discussions so that they refer to generic human problems or immediate personal issues. The feeling of intimacy with the characters, expressed in many of the groups, has a 'gossipy' quality which seems to facilitate an easy transition to discussion of oneself and one's close associates. It is likely that the continuous and indeterminate flow of the programme, from week to week, in the family salon invites viewers to invest themselves in fantasy, thought and discussion. The social distance between the Ewing family and the rest of the world seems far less important than one might have thought. Unhappiness is the great leveller.⁴

4. Altogether, we feel strongly supported in our hypotheses that the viewing process is active and social – perhaps even among those who vigorously deny it. The discussion frequently alludes to what discussants said last week or last month. This social process surely contributes to the ease of understanding (and sometimes to misunderstanding) and to the making of

meaning and evaluation. Anthropologists agree, even when survey statistics do not.⁵

5. The focus group method has proved very satisfactory. Discussions of television programmes, as simulated in these groups, appear to constitute a forum for the discussion of basic social issues and themes. They liberate people to say playfully – among their peers – what they might say seriously only in situations of crisis or conflict. It seems unlikely that these statements would be evoked in reply to an individual questionnaire or interview.

6. While we certainly cannot yet say anything about ethnic differences, groups will differ, we feel, in what we are calling 'critical distance' – that is, in the extent to which characters and issues are generalised or personalised. Certain ethnic groups tend to switch easily from the programme to their own lives; others keep their distance.

7. Hegemonic theorists will find it easy to interpret the reactions of both acceptors and rejectors of the values in *Dallas* as establishment messages. If the money and muscle of the Ewings is an invitation to the fantasies of social mobility and the supposed 'American way', then identification with the *Dallas* characters will serve the purpose. But what about those who see in *Dallas* only a reminder of how much better off they are without power? It takes only the slightest agility to see that this is even more hegemonic. It is a message to stay down, and enjoy the better of the possible worlds, letting the unhappy few take care of the rest.

Notes

1. W. Russell Neuman, 'TV and American Culture: The Mass Medium and the Pluralistic Audience', in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 46, 1982, 471-487.
2. In their forthcoming paper, 'Television as a Cultural Forum: Implications for Research', in *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch argue that television is a 'forum', presenting viewers with issues that need to be resolved. Their content analysis identifies three levels: topics, issues and themes.
3. Larry Gross makes a similar distinction between 'attributorial' and 'inferential' readings. The first connects the programme to parallels in real life, and the second (realising the constructedness of the event) infers the producer's intentions. See 'Life vs Art: The Interpretation of Visual Narratives', a lecture on US/Hungarian Interaction in Literature, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1983. The classic statement, of course, is Roman Jakobson.
4. Content analysis finds that American prime-time family programmes consistently offer this message of consolation for those who can't make it up. See Sari Thomas and Brian P. Callahan, 'Allocating Happiness: Television Families and Social Class', in *Journal of Communication*, 32, 1982.
5. Anthropologists are trying to show that survey research on the frequency of television talk is missing the active but subtle interpretations of programmes and applications to relevant issues that go on during and after viewing. See Jennifer Bryce and Hope Jensen Leichter, 'The Family and Television: Forms of Mediation', in *Journal of Family Issues*, 4, 1983, 309-328.

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