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Gender, Class and Television Viewing: Audience Responses to the *Ballroom of Romance*

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The concepts of social class and gender have been systematically addressed within reception studies of television audiences since the early 1980s. Morley's (1980) benchmark study of the *Nationwide* audience marked the beginning of empirical research within this framework on the ways in which class based discourses influenced interpretations of television. Gender too (though more commonly the female) has been the focus of a substantial body of work on the uses, meanings and pleasures of television (for example see Hobson, 1980 and 1982; Ang, 1985; Brown, 1990; Seiter *et al.*, 1989; Press, 1991; Geraghty, 1991). Despite the substantial theoretical and empirical attention devoted to both topics, however, there has been remarkedly little work on the ways in which social class and gender discourses articulate in television viewing contexts. This chapter focuses on such an articulation and is based on the findings of a qualitative audience study conducted in the mid-1980s on the uses and interpretation of television by women and men from different class backgrounds.

While the research was completed a decade ago, I feel that the findings are still relevant and instructive in a number of ways. Firstly, to my knowledge, it is an original piece of research which has not been replicated since that time and, on that basis, the findings themselves should be of intrinsic interest. Secondly, it provides a baseline study in terms of which subsequent and future work can be compared. In this context it raises questions about the extent to which class and gender-based taste cultures may have shifted since that time in the wake of social and technological changes affecting everyday life generally, and media consumption in particular.

Methodology

The research was conducted in two stages, consisting of semi-structured interviews and group discussions. The interviews explored the socio-demographic characteristics of the selected group members, work and leisure activities, and media use and preferences. The group discussions were used to investigate responses to the television drama the *Ballroom of Romance*. In combining these two research phases it was hoped that the nature of the relationship between the groups' position in the social structure, their subcultural experiences, and their response to a particular programme could be mapped out.

Data from eight groups comprising a total of 71 respondents and data from 46 individual interviews with group members is included in the analysis. A socio-demographic profile of the eight groups included in the analysis is provided in Appendix A (p. xx). The research was conducted with extant groups of various types ranging from groups participating in educational courses to community groups. The discussions following each viewing also took place in diverse locations and contexts ranging from the formal setting (educational context) to the more informal (group member's homes). This chapter explores the responses to the *Ballroom of Romance* by analysing extracts from the group discussions and drawing on the interview data.

The film the *Ballroom of Romance* had been adapted from the short story of the same name by William Trevor (1972) and was a joint BBC/ RTÉ production. It was first broadcast on RTÉ1 on 31 October 1982. Its TAM rating for this first broadcast was 46, that is 46 per cent of homes owning a television set had it switched on. It won high critical acclaim including a BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television) award.

The film is set in the west of Ireland in the 1950s in a remote rural ballroom to which the men and women flock every week until they marry or emigrate. The action of the film revolves round the main character, Bridie, a single woman living with and taking care of an ageing and semi-invalid father in addition to working their small farm. She cycles to the ballroom every Friday night, as she has done since she was a teenager, in the hope of meeting a suitable marriage partner. Her first love emigrated many years previously, married and settled in England. She would now settle for Dano Ryan, the drummer in the band who is characterised as a quiet, decent man who works on the roads. Her name has also been associated locally with Bowser Egan, one of the rowdy bachelor trio who spend the night in the local pub before putting in an appearance at the dance. One assumes that she has had some kind of relationship with Bowser in the past but the exact nature or quality of this relationship is never made explicit within the diegesis of the film. However, we are made aware that Bridie is not attracted to Bowser and that she regards him as lazy and feckless. On this particular night Bridie, in conversation with Dano,

hints at the possibility of marriage but Dano makes it clear that he is not interested in moving onto a farm. With her hopes of marriage to the drummer dashed, she makes a decision never to return to the ballroom as she looks at herself and her ageing peers and realises the loss of dignity associated with her situation. Bowser Egan asks her to dance and during the dance tells her that his mother is ill, will die shortly and that he will then be free to marry. Bridie, disappointed and angered by Dano's rejection and presumably her sense of humiliation, tells Bowser how repugnant she finds him physically, how she has resolved never to return to the ballroom and leaves the hall alone to cycle home. However, Bowser overtakes her on the road, promises to change his ways and invites her 'into the field'. We see Bridie turning her bicycle. The next scene shows Bowser closing the field gate, taking the last slug from the whiskey bottle and throwing it away. Then there is a cut to a shot of Bridie cycling home alone against the dawn sky, a resolute but otherwise indecipherable expression on her face.

While the discussions themselves covered a number of topics and were substantially open-ended, the topics covered here include the general response to the film, the response to the representation of gender roles and response to the main character, Bridie. By general response is meant the extent to which the groups liked or disliked the film and the reasons why. The topic of the representation of women's roles was chosen for investigation because the researcher's 'preferred reading' at the time was that the oppression of women was foregrounded in the film by the privileging of the women's discourse (through the main character, Bridie) both visually and verbally. There was no assumption, though, that the researcher's 'preferred reading' would necessarily coincide with that of the group members. The object of the analysis was to investigate the extent to which, and the ways in which, the representation of gender roles was discussed by the various groups. Also, given the importance of characterisation in fictional film, it was decided to analyse the groups' response to the central character, Bridie, in order to examine the ways in which the various groups related to her.

General Response

The three groups of working-class women expressed a dislike of the programme because it did not correspond to their idea of good television. One working-class group for example had this to say:

> . . . wasn't my type of programme.
> / A bit silly . . . a bit slow and a bit silly . . .
> / I watched it as well but I turned it off half way through.
> / There was no story in it . . . there was no dialogue to get interested in or anything

GF: So you'd like something with more dialogue . . . faster?
/ Yea . . . with more life in it.
/ I don't think the title of it suited it.
/ What was the title?
/ The *Ballroom of Romance*.
/ I mean there wasn't a bit of romance in it . . .
(Group A)

The above response can be partially understood in terms of this group's taste in television viewing. They rejected a genre which was perceived as too slow moving and lacking in a strong narrative element. Evidence from the interview data indicated that the women in group A were more involved with the action-packed, fast-moving police and adventure series, and with representations of the urban working class in naturalistic serials like *Coronation Street* and melodramatic serials such as *Dallas*. In fact the *Ballroom of Romance* was the antithesis of the series and serials which constituted their regular viewing, lacking in their view humour, suspense or excitement.

A second group consisting of young unemployed working-class women on a typing course were not very impressed by the film either. They felt that it was a film for older people because they might be better able to relate to that era. For themselves it was 'gloomy and 'boring':

. . . it's a film for older people who know what it was like in those days . . . not for the likes of us
GF: A lot of people said that it was boring [referring to the spontaneous remarks immediately after the viewing].
/ It was.
/ It would put you to sleep.
/ It was very gloomy . . .
(. . .)/ I think it was like that because they were only tryin' to show certain things that go on (. . .) I think it tried to just show . . . what sort of people there is in dances . . . not tryin' to show any more . . . just their personality . . . what they go through when they go to a dance . . . what is going through their mind . . .
(Group B)

The general response among the third group of young working-class women was one of complete boredom with the film, even more so than for the other two groups. The discussion was marked by what Morley (1980) has referred to as a 'critique of silence'. In other words they could not comment because they could not identify with the drama's representations which they perceived as being very remote from their own experiences and concerns. Despite repeated attempts on the part of the researcher to initiate conversation with all five in the group, only two made any sustained contribution to the discussion while two remained almost completely silent. A lot of probing was necessary and there were many long silences. In response to the question as to whether they had liked or disliked the film the response was:

. . . boring.
GF: Why was that?
/ It was the same thing all over again, every time there was a dance on everybody was standin' around the room . . .
/ That never really happens.
(. . .)/ Stupid.
GF: Stupid? . . . why do you say that?
/ 'Cos it was.
GF . . . in what ways? . . . would you look at that if it was on tv?
/ No . . .
/ There was nothin' in it . . .

(Group C)

They expressed an awareness of the cultural distance between their own experiences and the referential world of the ballroom. Their comment on the type of music and dancing represented in the film also revealed a distance from their own musical taste:

GF: What did you think of the music?
/ (laughs) . . . it was too . . . the one music all the time . . .
/ All lovey-dovey . . . you know boy-girl kind of a jig yoke.
/ If you did that at a disco now you'd get thrown out . . .

(Group C)

Other references were made throughout the discussion to their distance from the country and from rural experiences. One woman recounted her experience of going dancing in the country in the following extract:

. . . sure we went to a disco in Wicklow on Saturday night . . . we went in . . . you know . . . they were all kind of just jumping about ya know . . . they were all very culchee . . . a crowd of us and they all started going mad . . . ya know . . . like they were good dancers and they were jumpin' about . . . ya know . . . doin' all the latest things . . . ya know . . . and this guy came over eventually and told them they weren't supposed to be dancin' like that . . . that they weren't to dance like that ya know . . . to dance the way everyone else was dancin' . . . really stupid ya know . . . they were really amazed 'cos all the women came out of the kitchen and stood there and looked . . . 'Janey! Dublin people . . . look at the way they're dancin . . .'

(Group C)

In direct contrast to the working-class women, the middle-class women responded very favourably to the film since it did correspond to their idea of 'good' television drama. There was some, though not extensive, comment on the film as a constructed cultural commodity:

. . . it was awfully authentic . . . it was really very well done . . . they got all the details which Teilifis Éireann miss . . . you know . . . the BBC in any play about anything . . . they go for every tiny detail and by so doing you are completely transported into the time . . . I was watching all the details . . . I mean the big red faces and the hair brushed back . . . like out of the waxworks . . .

/ What I thought was very good . . . but it must be a theatrical device . . . is the way Mr. Dwyer was there at all the terribly important moments (. . .) he was a sort of link . . . I would say a theatrical device but I thought he . . . that was a very good thing . . . that couldn't have been in the book . . . well . . . if I were the director I would put it in there . . .
/ He was the father figure. . . . he was kind of in charge of everything . . .
(Group D)

Their opinion that the film would have universal appeal was related to their knowledge of it as an acclaimed cultural product:

GF: Do you think it appeals only to people here or . . . ?
/ No . . . it has universal appeal . . . they might not understand the circumstance . . . the situation is the same anywhere . . . it has won awards hasn't it? . . .
(Group D)

The general response was one of total enthusiasm for the play by the group of rural middle-class women who had themselves experienced the ballroom of romance era. They had a very positive orientation to the representation of the ballroom and of rural life. This discussion was marked by a preponderance of personal reminiscences of their own dancing experiences in similar ballrooms in the 1950s. The film seemed to act almost exclusively as a trigger for the bitter-sweet nostalgic recollections of the ballroom days which added an air of exhuberance to the discussion. There was no critical comment on the film as a commodity or on the formal aspects of its construction:

GF: Did people like it or not ?
/ Great.
(. . .) GF: Well did people identify with it?
/ Oh yes! very much so [(chorus of 'yes')].
GF: And had you seen it before . . . had anybody seen it before?
/ Yea . . . twice before.
(. . .)/ Yea . . . it brought back memories . . . sad . . . nostalgia.
GF why sad?
/ I don't know . . . the music was really beautiful . . . it just reminded me of the dances . . .
(Group E)

These women recalled the 1950s as being a happy and enjoyable time for them and the rural Ireland of their youth as classless. Much of the discussion was devoted to anecdotes of female cameradie and fun, of sexual innocence and naivety. Their reminiscences were tinged with nostalgia and they compared the ballroom days favourably with the dances and music of the present:

. . . you can't compare dances today with dances years ago . . . for instance a disco in no way compares to what we did (. . .) I think it would be great to see a return to the type of ballroom . . .
(. . .)/ It was smashing . . . the atmosphere was different . . .
(Group E)

A further striking feature of this group's discussion was the large number of references to sartorial elegence and fashion; what Dyer (1976) has referred to as 'sensuous materiality':

> . . . then when it came to the time of a dress dance . . . what we call 'the Dance' (. . .) and they'd all come in their long dresses . . . and I always remember . . . buttons and bows here (. . .) and a bustle under that and a big bow here at the back . . . and maybe a little flower here . . . and we used to meet them at the shop and we'd all know the dance and we'd all go up that night and they'd all come in in their different colours . . . satin . . . no . . . taffeta . . . it made a nice rustle and we'd watch them there and wonder who were they going with . . . it looked like something out of this world . . .
> / Fairyland.
> / Yea . . . fairyland . . .
>
> (Group E).

The response of the men's groups to the film was not as strictly demarcated by a social-class cleavage although there were class differences between groups and possibly within groups, although the latter is more difficult to substantiate given the limitations of the group discussion method. There was a mixed reaction to the film among group F (young urban working-class men), with the majority disliking it because they did not see it as realistic and a minority liking it because they did regard it to be so:

> GF: Did you like it or not or what?
> / Ok.
> / I thought it was great.
> GF: Why?
> / That's what goes on at a dance . . . at discoes . . . girls at one side and boys at the other side and they're scared to . . .
> GF: You're saying that happens now?
> / It fucking does . . . in the Tara Club . . . all the young ones . . .
>
> (Group F)

and again:

> . . . not really much of a story but it was good.
> GF: Yea . . . why do you think it was good?
> / Don't know . . . in the country . . . show what's goin' on down there maybe . . . it was good . . .
>
> (Group F)

The negative comments were expressed as follows:

> . . . just don't like it . . . it's very boring sort of . . .
> (. . .) GF: How was it different from what you would like on television?
> / I dunno.
> / If *Top of the Pops* was on one station I'd watch it . . . and if ( ) on the other station . . . just forget it you know . . . if there was cricket on one station and that on the other station . . . if you only had two[channels] I'd watch that . . . I wouldn't watch cricket anyway.
> (. . .)/ I dunno . . . it was too boring . . . not based on real life . . .
>
> (Group F)

The mixed-class group, though predominantly working class, and consisting of redundant workers, reacted favourably to the film. They claimed to like it because they saw it as a vignette of rural life in Ireland in the 1950s and there was an emphasis in the discussion on their interpretation of the social history of the period:

> . . . enjoyable
> GF: Yea . . . why did you enjoy it?
> / It told us what life was like a good few years ago down in . . . wherever it was . . . you know and it's all changed now . . . I think it has down around that area anyway because I go down there (. . .) dance halls and all . . . like Quinnsworth . . . modern . . . you know what I mean . . . there's a bar and all in there and they all do their own thing . . .
>
> (Group G)

The group of middle-class business men also liked the film very much:

> GF: Did you like it?
> / Do you mean technically or . . . ?
> GF: Did you like it?
> / I thought it was very good.
> / I thought that it did reflect something that did happen twenty or thirty years ago but I don't know whether it's so valid nowadays . . . not near as bad . . . even down around Ballycroy.
> / (. . .) I thought it was very realistic.
> / (. . .) I thought it was a very sad film even the first time I saw it . . . you know . . . the people there were really prisoners in that place . . . they couldn't even talk to each other . . . absolutely incredible . . . very very sad . . . brilliant technically . . . really brilliant.
> / I thought it was extremely authentic as well . . .
>
> (Group H)

We see how this group's initial reaction was to identify the film as a cultural commodity much like the urban middle-class women and to discuss it in terms of numerous production features such as technical aspects, performances, authenticity, and realism. There was also an awareness of the possibility of evaluating it at more than one level as the question 'do you mean technically or . . .?' indicates.

Discussion of General Responses

Broadly speaking each group's response to the *Ballroom of Romance* could be usefully visualised on a continuum which places the working-class women's groups at the 'dislike' end, the middle-class groups of women and men at the 'like' end, and the working-class and mixed men's groups in the middle. However, it is necessary to go beyond this rather crude categorisation to begin to understand the meanings of the terms 'like' and 'dislike'. One of the most striking differences in response in terms of enjoyment emerged between the

women's groups with the middle-class women expressing an enjoyment of the film and the working-class women stating a definite boredom with it. Enjoyment, or lack of, were expressed on two levels which are intertwined in practice but are separated out here for analytical purposes. The first was an identification with the form of the film as encapsulated in the remarks of the female and male middle-class groups. The second was an identification with aspects of the representation, for example, Bridie's pitiful situation (Group D) or with memories of the dance-hall era (Group E). Dislike of the film was also expressed in these two ways. The form was rejected in terms of it being slow, the music boring, the plot not sufficiently exciting and so on. The second way in which dislike of the film was expressed was in terms of an irrelevance to their own lives based on a perceived distance between their own lives and the lives of the characters portrayed in the film.

The form of the film had no attraction for the working-class women (groups A, B and C). They expressed a dislike of the film because they regarded it as slow and boring with no story line or action. Their lack of enjoyment can be linked to their genre preferences. The interview data indicated that the women in group A expressed a preference for fiction; naturalistic and melodramatic serials, police, detective and hospital series. Within these genres the elements which they appreciated were action, suspense, adventure and humour. The *Ballroom of Romance* could not be said to include any of these elements. On the contrary it was a once-off film, perceived to be slow-moving without a strong storyline and lacking in humour. It did not fit, therefore, into their criteria of good television and was rejected on this basis.

The second plane on which dislike was expressed was in terms of the distance between the representations in the film and the concerns of their own lives. Since the film was located in the past in rural Ireland they could not identify with the situations or characters represented. Group B for instance specifically rejected 'old-fashioned' plays and historical series. Generally, their television viewing was light, with music televison and melodramatic serials being their favourite programmes. Their own interest in music, fashion, pop stars and teenage magazines could be seen to be based on their involvement in a 'subculture of femininity' (see McRobbie, 1978) which was immediate, current and subject to constant change. Representations located in the past, therefore, were regarded as dated and *passé*.

The distance expressed by the working-class women's groups from the past and from rural life was not confined to media representations but could be seen to be a reflection of a more general rejection of a dominant strand of Irish culture which draws heavily on 'tradition' (associations with the past), and rural romanticism.[1] Their lack of involvement in a 'national' discourse and their orientation towards the popular culture of a more urbanised society was reflected in their preference for British television and print media. The involvement of

teenagers in British and US media has also been documented by Dillon (1982:163) and Reynolds (1986:2). However, group A did engage with the public sphere through the viewing of RTÉ current affairs programmes on local issues particularly those which were seen to affect the family, such as programmes on crime and drugs. The working-class women's cultural reference points were, therefore, almost exclusively local or Anglo-American. Unlike the middle-class women who were involved in a 'national' discourse, they did not have the cultural experience which would help them to identify with the portrayal of rural life located in the past.

It is instructive to compare the groups of urban working-class women with the urban middle-class women with regard to media use and preferences. The latter group's reported television viewing included a mix of actuality programming and fictional genres. They regularly watched or listened to current affairs and documentaries thus involving themselves in a more 'public' and 'national' media agenda than their working-class counterparts. They also reported regular viewing of drama in the form of once-off plays, historical and costume drama, and films. They expressed a dislike of melodramatic serials and to some extent naturalistic serials (though response towards the latter was mixed) and violent programmes. It would appear that the elements which were rejected by this group – spontaneity, violence, participation – were precisely those which were germane to the working-class women's pleasure (see Bourdieu, 1980). It is not surprising then that the stylistic conventions of the genre and the modes of representation of the *Ballroom of Romance* were more likely to be more appreciated by middle-class than by working-class women.

While social class was shown to be a major factor in influencing the general response of the women's groups, gender was also important. This was evidenced in the differences in general response between the working-class women and men. The group of young urban working-class men (F) reacted to the film differently, with some members finding it enjoyable and others pronouncing a definite dislike. If we compare their response to that of their female counterparts (C), we see that more of the young men enjoyed it. It is noteworthy that the enjoyment of the film by the working-class men was based on their perception of it as a social commentary or documentary. The members of group F who liked it perceived it as realistic since it portrayed 'what's goin' on down there [in the country] maybe'. It was also clear from the remarks made by the mixed class-group (G) that they also treated the film as a vignette of social life in rural Ireland in the 1950s. As one of the men commented 'it seemed more of a documentary on the Mayo dance hall to me than anything else . . . it didn't develop any characters in the play . . . it told us what life was like a good few years ago down in . . .' A similar emphasis on the realism of the film was also apparent at the individual interviews during which remarks were made that it was very educational, a good view of the 1950s or 'more of a statement . . . it's just a social comment'.[2]

I would suggest that this factual orientation to the play on the part of group G can be usefully linked to the discourses which this group inhabited and which, in turn, influenced their media preferences for factual programmes such as news, documentaries and current affairs. These men were more involved in 'public' discourses than the working-class women who were confined to the domestic and private domains of life which influenced their radio and television genre preferences in the 'private' direction. In fact the working-class women had expressed a definite antipathy towards current affairs programming in terms such as 'I never understand them . . . all politics . . . I'm not interested'. Their viewing was very much in line with the 'public' and 'private' agenda documented by Hobson (1980). In her study of media use she found a polarity between the working-class women who worked full time in the home and their husbands who worked outside the home as regards television viewing. The women rejected programmes which were seen to belong to the 'man's world' including news, current affairs and, to a lesser extent, documentaries, and they actively chose viewing which was understood to constitute a 'woman's world'. These findings were also applicable to the women to whom I spoke. Alternatively, the men, given their involvement in more 'public' discourses both in terms of media use and greater access to other 'public' domains, had a greater claim to knowledge of rural life as expressed in references to emigration in the 1950s, the west of Ireland, community expectations of the characters and so on.

These observations on the differences in response on the part of working-class women and men would tend to suggest that both came to the viewing situation with different expectations and orientations and judged the film accordingly. It would appear that the women came to it with an emotional/romantic sensibility and were disappointed. As one of the working-class women commented when speaking of her reasons for disliking the film said, 'there was no romance in it'. It would appear that the men, on the other hand, came to the film with a factual orientation, were able to frame it in terms of social documentary, and could respond to it on that level.

The general response of all the middle-class groups was favourable though the sources of enjoyment varied between them. The rural women's group expressed their enjoyment in terms of the ways in which representations of the ballroom evoked nostalgic memories of their own dancing days in ballrooms similar to the one portrayed. For the urban middle-class women their enjoyment lay principally in their identification with Bridie's situation which reminded them of women they knew. The middle-class male group tended to emphasise the technical aspects of the film when asked for their response. They also found that the representations were sad in the sense that they perceived the characters as prisoners caught in a trap of social convention.

Regarding the form of the film, the female urban-middle class group regarded it as 'technically brilliant' and as having universal appeal, good acting

and so on; comments which could be classified as metalinguistic or 'critical' (see Liebes and Katz, 1984). They were aware that it had won television awards which, for them, appeared to enhance its value as a cultural commodity. As in the case of the other groups, their response to the film can be linked to their preferences for once-off plays and 'serious' drama. The kind of critical comment made by this group would seem to indicate the operation of a certain level of 'disinterested and distanced contemplation' which Bourdieu (1980) has claimed to be germane to bourgeois aesthetic sensibilities.

However, while the response to this aspect of the film's form manifested a definite class cleavage, the group of rural middle-class women were the exception to the rule in that they did not make any 'critical' or 'metalinguistic' comment on the film. On the basis of their class position, one might have expected this group to be involved in a discourse which would elicit 'critical' comment on the programme. Its absence in the discussion can only be speculated on here. Their mean educational level was lower than their urban counterparts and it is likely that education is the primary factor in the acquisition of this form of cultural capital (see Bourdieu, 1980). In addition the strength of the rural group's identification with the ballroom era may also have militated against their commenting on the form of the programme.[3] The context of the discussion – one of female camaraderie and fun – also contributed, I would suggest, to the extra-textual thrust of the comments. It may well be that the demarcation of aesthetic codes by social class is stronger in cities since there are more opportunities for constructing cultural distinctions because of the greater availability of 'high' culture and the arts in the metropolis.

Responses to the Representation of Women's Roles

Responses to the representation of women's roles in the film also varied substantially between the groups. The past/present opposition is useful in exploring the differences between them. As in the case of the general response the remarks of the working-class women on the representation of women's roles were substantially similar. They frequently activated the past/present axis in terms of the past being bad and the present good, or, at least, better. They claimed that life had changed dramatically for women since the era portrayed in the film – that women could now remain single if they wished because they had more education and better career prospects. The idea of freedom of choice for women generally was a motif in this discussion. With reference to the difference between women then and now, one group had this to say:

> . . . and they'd be more outspoken [referring to women in a contemporary context]. / You don't go to a dance nowadays to discuss the farm . . . or the pigs or the sows or whatever else he had.

/ Women are more independent as well.
/ You wouldn't be depending on . . .
(. . .) GF: In what way are women less dependent?
/ In every way.
/ Women are better about themselves now . . . they are more educated . . .

(Group A)

Another group expressed the changes for women in terms of dancing etiquette:

. . . it would be insultin' if you weren't asked up to dance . . . you were like a wallflower
(. . .) I think the women were so desperate that they would take anyone . . . they would dance with anyone . . . it's rude to say no . . . so an awful lot of them are just gettin' up to dance because they feel they had to (. . .) the thing has changed a bit now . . . it was like that then . . . you know . . .

(Group B)

Yet another considered that women have more of a choice of career now than in the past:

. . . women have more of a choice these days . . . at that stage they hadn't got careers to look forward to or they had no variety of careers . . . it was either a secretary or a wife . . . or something like that you know . . . you hadn't a great choice but now they have a choice . . . you can choose what you want yourself . . . you are not forced into something . . .

(Group C)

By far the most feminist thrust came from the urban middle-class group (D) in response to the representation of women's roles. While they too operated with the concepts of past and present, they dissolved the dichotomous relationship between them maintaining that Bridie's situation continues today in a different guise:

. . . it doesn't have to be fellas like that . . . we all know fellas in clubs and in places who generally drink too much and [people say] 'he's a hard man' . . . he isn't a hard man . . . he should get a good kick . . . he is a bloody nuisance to everyone . . .

(Group D)

And:

. . . I mean if you take rural Ireland . . . it's all there you know . . . it might be dressed up a little bit . . . in a Ford Fiesta instead of a bicycle . . . but I don't think there is any difference . . . I really don't . . .

(Group D)

The treatment of women by the male dancers in the ballroom was also regarded as humiliating by this group:

. . . what I really thought was very sad about that thing was that when you went into the ballroom . . . the women on the one side and the men on the other . . . and the women could not make the first move.

/ They couldn't make any move.
/ The men . . . suddenly one will go and then the whole herd.
/ That's exactly what it is . . . a herd.
/ It's awful to be a woman in that situation to stand there and wait for these ignoramuses . . . when the herd has passed and you've been passed over . . .

(Group D)

There was little discussion of gender roles among the rural middle-class group (E). However, the comments they did make could be located at the other end of the spectrum from group D in terms of their perception of the oppression of women as an element in the film. The past/present dichotomy was, once again, activated by the rural group in respect of women's roles. In this case, though, they gave the past a positive value as they had direct experience of the era portrayed in the film and did not consider it to have been oppressive. They claimed, as we have already witnessed, that it was an era of sexual innocence and classlessness in which they had been poor but happy. They harked back after these 'good old days'. There was an awareness that things had changed for women – that women now have more freedom, but these changes were to some extent regarded as retrogressive and they felt that women were in a more vulnerable position currently than in the past:

. . . young girls now don't want to get married . . . it isn't their primary object in life.
/ No way . . . it's only secondary.
/ Do you think that marriage is going to die out?
/ I don't think they are any better . . . not very liberated living with those fellows because my reading of it . . . cases that I know . . . after a few years it's the fellas who want to bale out.
/ that's true . . .

(Group E)

There were also differences between the men's groups regarding the representation of women's roles in the film, ranging from the overt sexism of the young working-class group to the less overt form of the mixed-class and middle-class groups. The work roles of Bridie and her father were perceived by the former in the following way:

. . . I think it was the same . . . the woman workin' in the fields with her dad . . . [his] leg amputated or something and she was doin' as much work as him and she brought him home in the cart and all this . . . and then yer one Bridie would be doin' things for her father like washing the eggs and keeping them out for Monday for him and doin' the rest of the things you know . . . I'd say it was the same.
GF: It was equal?
/ Yea . . . women did the same amount of work.
GF: Yea?
/ Well . . . that's what I saw in the film anyway . . .

(Group F)

The striking aspect of this recollection was that Bridie's workload was perceived as being equal to that of her father when, in fact, the film portrayed Bridie as doing most of the work. The fact that they perceived Bridie as 'helping' indicates the way in which preconceived ideas about gender work roles were brought to bear on their perception of the division of labour within the film.

Sexism also appeared to be a key element in their enjoyment of certain scenes. In response to the question:

> GF: Were there any scenes in the film that struck you as being particularly funny?
> / That fat auld wan that was chasin' all the men.
> GF: (. . .) Why do you say that?
> / The way she went on . . . she was dyin' to get a fella she was . . . I think (laughs).
> GF: And did you think she was funny?
> / Yea . . . I thought she was funny . . . the way she was goin' on you know . . . tryin' to get off with someone . . . and she was goin' around tryin' everybody . . . she asked the man if he wanted a cigarette and she was waitin' and just puts his lighter back in his pocket . . . she was chasin' that new bloke . . . the fella that was fixing himself up in the room that time.
> / (. . .) he was dancin' and he wouldn't look at her . . .

Some of the conversation focused on relationships with the opposite sex. They saw women as waiting to trap men into marriage:

> . . . women are too much into 'love' nowadays . . . talk about 'love' and all that and [they say] 'never leave me' . . . marriage and all this.
> / (. . .) I don't think blokes really want to be tied down.
> / The more they talk about lovin' ya and all the worse it is because they just . . . just puttin' ya under pressure all the time . . . you get a pain . . . that's what happened to me . . . I just got browned off . . .

There was a range of reactions to women's roles among the members of the mixed-class group. Some men were overtly sexist, others were not. However, much of the conversation was generalised rather than relating directly to the representation of women's roles within the film. While there was a consensus that women were now becoming more liberated, as in the case of the working-class women, the tone of the remarks suggested a a certain degree of resentment of the perceived changes:

> . . . as regards women they are holding their own . . . it's not unreasonable to see a girl going over to a fella now an' sayin' 'are you gettin' up to dance?'and if he doesn't he'll get a slap in the jaw or whatever the case may be . . . it has gone to that stage.
> / (. . .) I don't think blokes really want to be tied down . . .
> / Yea . . . another thing there is drink . . . dutch courage . . . women are going into the pubs and going over with a half bottle of gin in them or whatever the hell is goin' . . .

The middle-class group, although less overtly sexist than the other two male groups, did not perceive that women, as represented in the film, were more oppressed than men. The main theme of the film was considered to be the trap of convention which was seen to be universal, current and equally applicable to men and women:

> . . . it wasn't sadness that struck me . . . it was sort of pathetic . . . they were caught . . . they were all caught and (. . .) I think the thing that struck me was that she [Bridie] accepted her reality and he [Bowser] wasn't her choice . . . and he accepted his reality (. . .) the reality was this structure and I thought . . . the fella and the girl . . . they were equally constrained . . .

It is also interesting to contrast their response to the group of urban middle-class women on the issue of men asking women to dance. The men perceived it, not as an exercise of male control, but as a source of vulnerability for themselves:

> . . . on paper it looks as if they have equal power . . . but when he goes up and gets a few refusals . . . it's more difficult for him to make . . . you know . . . to use that power I think because of the refusal and the hurt you feel in a refusal . . .

Discussion of Responses to the Representation of Women's Roles

Because the working-class women felt that women's roles had changed dramatically since the era portrayed in the film, they thought that the relevance of the representation of the women in the film to the current social reality was severely limited. As we witnessed earlier, these groups displayed a distance from the past and from rural life both in terms of their media preferences and at a more general experiential level. Given the cultural distance, then, between the representations in the film and their own experiences, it would have been difficult for them to perceive a correspondence between women's roles in the film and women's roles in the current social reality outside the film.

The middle-class group, as already noted, was by far the most feminist in its thrust. The members of this group perceived the portrayal of women's roles in the film as having direct relevance to women's current situation. In contrast to the working-class women, this particular group discussion was marked by a claim to knowledge and understanding of rural life. Some of this knowledge was based on their personal experience and was encapsulated in comments such as 'people I had known'. It was also based on more general, public, socio-political knowledge as references to the EC grants, the breach-Gaeltacht, various geographical locations, Donagh O'Malley's free school scheme and the like, indicated. The differentiated knowledge of geographical areas of the country was in striking contrast to the undifferentiated perceptual map of the working-class women who generally distinguised only between Dublin and the rest of the country.

The middle-class group had access to discourses which were not at the disposal of the working-class women. Their cultural experience differed significantly in terms of class background and educational levels from the working-class women (see O'Connor, 1987). They were also more geographically mobile since some of the group had rural backgrounds but were educated 'out' of rural Ireland. Those with urban backgrounds also had a personal knowledge of the country. This group were actively involved in interests outside the home and were all members of an association aimed at the advancement of women in political life through their promotion within the mainstream political parties, signifying their involvement in a feminist discourse. The cultural experiences of this group, therefore, would have given them access to competences which would facilitate an understanding of the representations of women in the film and an ability to see connections between them and the extra-textual reality.

The uncritical orientation of the group of rural middle-class women to the representation of women's role in the film and their desire to uphold traditional gender values can again be accounted for by reference to the cultural discourses which this group inhabited. Because of their age and rural location, this group had direct personal youthful experience of the same type of ballroom as that portrayed in the film. As already noted, they recalled their experience of the era as being carefree and happy. They operated the past/present axis in favour of the past. They would have grown up in a climate of social conservatism in which both the ideology of the Roman Catholic church and of traditional rural society would have tended to emphasise the importance of the place of things in the natural order, and thus operated to maintain the social and political status quo.

The responses from the men's groups demonstrated that, while there were class inflections, they all displayed a distance from the portrayal of women in the film. As evidenced from the comments of the working-class group, they were the most overtly sexist in this respect. This is not an unexpected reaction given the cultural experience of being male, teenage and working class. The tendency of 'drop-out' working-class boys to be involved in their immediate environmental culture which emphasises 'macho' traits has been noted by Willis (1977) in Britain and by Dillon (1984) in her study of Irish youth subcultures.[4]

The emphasis in the mixed-class group's discussion was on the ways in which women's lives had improved since the 1950s and to this extent they were similar to the working-class women. However, one of the most obvious aspects of their comments on women's roles was that they contained a definite negative attitude to what they considered to be women's increasing liberation. The middle-class men's group focused on what they perceived to be the oppression of men within the film. They did this by reference to the trap of social convention which was perceived as operating equally on men and women, their own vulnerability in social dancing etiquette, and by focusing on areas in which

they considered men to be oppressed by women, as in the case of the control which the Irish mother was perceived to exercise over her sons. The distance expressed by the men was not a distance from the past and rurality, as in the case of the working-class women, but rather a distinct lack of empathy with the experiences of women *qua* women and a refusal/ inability to acknowledge a wider asymmetry of power relations between the sexes in a patriarchal society.

Responses to the Main Character

Responses to the main character, Bridie, were again characterised by variation between groups. The three working-class women's groups displayed a somewhat ambiguous response to Bridie. Group A sympathised[5] with her because of her failure to get a man and because she was no longer considered to be attractive:

> GF: What did you think of Bridie?
> / I thought she was a right eejit.
> / She was very lonely.
> / I felt sorry for her as well and I thought . . . you know she wasn't all that great to look at . . . that she would suit anybody . . . you know.
> / I thought she was attractive enough in her own way.
> / I mean she was overweight and her age wasn't all that . . .
> / Compared to some of them that were there . . . she was a lot nicer than them . . .
> / Yea . . . but as I say what age would she have been . . . forty?
>
> (Group A)

Here we can see the importance which this group attached to the assets of youth and beauty in attracting a husband. Of interest in this context is the emphasis placed on physical beauty and sexual attractiveness for women as a resource in the sexual/marriage market place. While it must be acknowledged that these traits are valued for all women, they may have a more fundamental importance for working-class women as resources on the marriage market than for middle-class women who also usually have access to a career and/or money or property.

The expression of sympathy for Bridie on the basis of her inability to get a husband was also reiterated by the younger working-class women. Group C commented:

> . . . she seemed to be just . . . she was very unhappy . . . the first guy that she was going out with . . . he went off to England to work because there was no work where they were and she was just left there . . . and that seemed to be happening through her life
> / even the one she wanted she couldn't have . . . the ones she didn't want.
> GF: So do you feel sorrry for her in any way?
> / Yea . . . you'd feel sorry for her . . . it seemed as if she had terrible worries on her head you know . . . she's never goin' to get married . . . she wasn't goin' to the dance any more you know . . . somebody like that you'd feel sorry for them . . .
>
> (Group C)

It seemed to me that while the working-class women's groups did express a sympathy with Bridie because of her failure to get a husband, they did not have an immediate identification with her. There were few spontaneous expressions of sympathy, these coming only in response to specific questions, as can be seen in the comments from group C cited above, and even then the reply was in the conditional tense. One member of group A saw her as 'a right eejit' while others thought that she was somewhat stupid to tolerate her situation and that she should have done something about changing her life.

The urban middle-class women's group was the only one to strongly empathise with Bridie in a spontaneous and overtly emotional manner. Admiration for her character was encapsulated in remarks such as 'she was a very sensitive and intelligent person'. But most of their comments were directed at her sad and unenviable situation:

> . . . her face changed to people I knew. . . . I was so interested . . . I have actually gone back in my mind . . . I can see the village I came from which is a very backward rural village and I know people like her and they are still there . . . their faces came on the screen and the things that happened to them . . . and I felt a lump here [pointing to her throat] . . .
>
> (Group D)

This group also referred to Bridie's humiliation and powerlessness at the dance:

> . . . when she was dancing with that young lad he had been talking about . . . for example the Bowser . . . he just brushed him aside . . . she couldn't do anything . . . my reaction would be if I could I would knock him down . . .
>
> (Group D)

The empathy for Bridie was also expressed in relation to Bridie's efforts to woo the drummer:

> . . . you know the saddest thing for me . . . where poor Bridie was talking to the drummer and trying to get him over to her side . . . gosh . . . you know . . . the goose pimples were bursting out on me . . . I think it was beneath her to grovel like that . . .
>
> (Group D)

We have already seen how the rural middle-class women did not consider Bridie's situation to be pitiable in any way and consequently did not express either sympathy or empathy with her. In fact, they did not identify at all with Bridie's pressing need to find a husband. As one woman commented 'well . . . we were never in that position . . . so we don't know'. For the most part their references to Bridie were really only incidental to their own reminiscences. This lack of identification with Bridie is most likely attributable to the fact that their primary point of engagement with the film was in terms of the identification with the feeling of romance which the music and dance evoked, rather than with the personality or situation of particular characters. Given the

nature of the engagement with the film by this group, it is not implausible to suggest that they projected *themselves* as characters in the film.

The men's group did not make extensive spontaneous reference to Bridie either. Group F, for example, in response to a direct question had this to say:

> GF: What do you think of Bridie?
> / The wan that was tryin' to get fixed up with the drummer? (general laughter)
> GF: Yea.
> / She was alright most of the time . . .
>
> (Group F)

While both the middle-class urban group and the mixed-class group did actually state that they felt sorry for her (see general response), a more fundamental indication of their attitude towards her, I would suggest, is encapsulated in their use of language which was to a large extent distancing and at times disapproving and/or patronising. A particularly striking feature of their linguistic pattern was the use of game and sporting analogies when discussing her (and, indeed, when discussing the other women characters).

Group G expressed a sympathy for Bridie but in the tongue-in-cheek manner communicated in comments such as:

> . . . poor ould Bridie felt very sorry for herself . . . didn't she? . . . 'cos she was gettin' left on the shelf . . . wasn't she?
> / (. . .) She didn't want to . . . you know what I mean . . . be like everybody else . . . didn't want to accept Bowser at the start . . . she wanted to be a bit better up the ladder if you like . . . (. . .) a gentleman she was lookin' for . . . but she had to bow down to what everybody else was.
> / She was a bit of a liberator . . .
>
> (Group G)

The members of the middle-class group were also unsympathetic to Bridie. They suggested ways in which she could have handled her situation better and they also hinted at what they regarded as characteristic female duplicity in her dealings with Bowser:

> . . . I don't think she really means that she's not going back to the dance (. . .) I think it's only a facade in front of the other people that she . . . you know . . . buzzed off on him [Bowser] . . . your man was cycling up behind her and she was cyclin' way ahead . . . he didn't leave for maybe five or ten minutes afterwards . . . but she seemed to be waiting close to the field.
> GF: you think she planned it?
> / Oh yea . . .
>
> (Group H)

Later in the conversation Bridie is criticised for breaking the rules of the game:

> . . . she turned around and went into the field with him.
> / She suffered from sexual frustration or something.
> / She's meant to say 'no'.
> / Well . . . you see she's broken the rules of the game here . . .
>
> (Group H)

Discussion of Responses to the Main Character

The alignment of responses to Bridie was substantially similar to how groups responded to the representation of women's roles in the film, with the middle-class women's group displaying the most empathy with Bridie's situation. Both the working-class women and and working-class and middle-class men expressed what I have termed a conditional sympathy with Bridie but their sympathy was based on different 'situated logics'. For the working-class women, their sympathy was based on a 'feeling for' her situation as a woman and expressed in terms of her inability to get a husband, her ageing and loss of looks. The sympathy expressed by the men's groups for Bridie was in terms of the general constraints on people's lives, both men and women, in the era and location portrayed in the film. What is interesting in the latter case is that while her 'femaleness' was brought into play, it was in a critical rather than a sympathetic way. The fact that she was accused of being a 'bit of a liberator', duplicitious in her dealing with Bowser, incompetent and/or wilful in 'breaking the rules of the game', all indicate an emotional distance from her as a character.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the ways in which eight selected groups of working-class and middle-class women and men responded to the television film the *Ballroom of Romance*. Through discussion of three aspects of the film, the general response in terms of like or dislike, responses to the representation of women's roles and, finally, responses to the main protagonist, Bridie, the groups arrived at distinctive orientations to, and interpretations of, the film which were largely determined by social-class and gender-based discourses. The full significance of the film for each group included not only their interpretation of specific scenes and sequences but also their response to the film in terms of the pleasure which it afforded and the perceived relevance to their own lives. Because they inhabited different kinds of discourses and had access to different cultural competences, the viewing situation was framed in ways which differentially influenced the pleasures and meanings of the text. Or to put it another way, the groups had different ways of seeing the film based on different kinds of enjoyment, different levels of emotional involvement, and different points of engagement with the text.

By including a range of groups in the discussions, the analysis was able to go beyond some of the more generalised gender and class-based theories regarding the meanings and pleasures of television and could indicate the specific ways in which gender is differentiated by social class and social class, in turn, is differentiated by gender.

If the findings are considered in terms of the broader debate about power in this volume, more specifically the balance of freedom and constraint in the

activity of television viewing, it is clear that audiences are not free to construct meaning in an infinite number of ways around the text. In this case there was a limit to 'semiotic democracy' (see Fiske, 1987), a limit imposed by the discourses of social class, gender, age, and to some extent, urban/rural locale. However, in arguing for the effectivity of structural constraints on the viewing activity, I do not want to subscribe to a reductionist analysis. It is patently clear from the findings that there were differences within groups which cannot be fully accounted for in social class or gender terms. For instance it is still unclear why some members of the urban working-class group of young men liked the film and others disliked it. A more truly ethnographic methodology would be essential in providing a fuller understanding of the situation.

In the introduction I raised the issue of the possible changes in media consumption since the time of this study. It is not possible to make any definitive statements in the absence of sufficient research evidence, but the available research indicates (see for example O'Connor, 1990, and Kelly in this volume) that gender differences continue to be an important dimension of response to at least some media genres. However, given the rapid social and economic changes in Ireland since the mid-1980s, it would be reasonable to assume that there already are gradual and parallel changes in patterns of media use and taste which will soon become apparent. To get a clearer picture of the nature and extent of both stability and change around media use, though, one would need to consider, not only the reception of particular programmes, but also the broader relationships between social class, gender and television consumption. In this regard some of the research questions which one might pose are the extent to which women's and men's changing position in Irish society has altered their media consumption. For example if more women are now working in paid employment outside the home are they listening to less radio and with what consequences, or, alternatively, if there has been an increase in certain kinds of male unemployment which confines them more to the home, has this led to a greater viewing of daytime television including daytime soaps, traditionally perceived as a 'woman's genre'? Another relevant issue might be the extent to which the 'national' discourse which some of the groups inhabited and which were constructed by the national broadcasting service in the past will be altered by the increasing pressures on public service broadcasting and the availability of alternative 'imagined communities' through the newer media technologies. One might also query if 'ironic viewing' as part of a contemporary or postmodern sensibility has become a more widespread form of engagement with television generally. The answer to these questions and others awaits further empirical investigation and analysis of media consumption in Ireland.

Appendix

Discussion Group Profiles

NAME	SIZE	GENDER	SOCIAL CLASS	MEAN AGE
A	13	female.	working	25yrs.
B	08	female	working	17yrs.
C	05	female	working	17yrs.
D	08	female	middle	42yrs.
E	12	female	middle	55yrs.
F	07	male	working	17yrs.
G	10	male	mixed	30yrs.
H	08	male	middle	35yrs.

Notes

1. For a fuller discussion of the dominance of a conservative rurally-based culture in urban Ireland see McLoone (1984).
2. While the film's status as a social document was also commented on by other groups, it was not nearly as extensive as in group G.
3. I would also suggest that the evocative nature of the music exercised a powerful identificatory pull on this group especially since it was associated with the pleasures of youthful dancing. For a fuller discussion of the correspondence between musical and emotional rhythms see Langer (1955).
4. The sexism of group F is also likely to be partially context-related in that the members of the group were more willing to criticise women when talking amongst their peers. It is suggested that in the latter context they acquire a bravado which would probably be less pronounced in a one-to-one discussion with the group facilitator.
5. A distinction is drawn between the related terms 'empathy' and 'sympathy'. The former is defined for the purposes in hand as an 'appreciative understanding' or 'feeling with' a person or situation. 'Sympathy' is taken to refer to a compassion which is not based on a full appreciation or understanding – a 'feeling for' a person or situation. I am grateful to Dr Helen Burke, formerly of the Department of Social Administration, University College Dublin, for initially clarifying this distinction for me.

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