Do critical viewers learn from television?

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Abstract:
What does it mean to be 'critical' as a television viewer? How does it influence what we learn and how we learn from television? Although analytical and critical media literacy skills are necessary in order to learn from the media, audience studies suggest that being critical can hinder learning, especially when it involves cynicism, scepticism and distrust of the content. In this article, I explore this contradiction to determine whether being critical facilitates or impedes televisual learning. Based on two focus group discussions conducted with viewers, I argue that there are two ways to be critical when watching television: *critical viewing* is a form of intellectual distance that is incompatible with learning whereas *critical involvement* is a form of intellectual proximity with the televisual text that facilitates learning through critical thinking.

Key words: television; informal learning; critical media literacy; critical viewing; referential viewing; soap opera; *Home and Away.*

Introduction

Being critical is necessary in order to make informed decisions about media content. Analytical media literacy skills are crucial because they empower media users and enable them to fully participate in public life and democratic processes (Buckingham, 2003, 2005; Lewis & Jhally, 1998; Livingstone, 2002, 2004, 2011). Critical media literacy is also considered essential in order to learn from the media (Brabazon, 2006; Hartley, 1999). Indeed, for media technologies to be used as informal sites of learning, users need to be media literate. In other words, audiences must be able to critically understand and analyse media content in order to learn from it. However, audience studies conducted with television viewers show that being critical can also hinder learning, particularly if viewers become cynical and intellectually distant from the televisual text. From this perspective, being critical means that the analytical viewer perceives the programme's constructedness and through this intellectual distance becomes able to identify, question, challenge and

resist its agenda and its teaching. Audience researchers often contrast this 'critical viewing' position with 'referential viewing', which means that the viewer connects televisual content to real life and accepts its 'reality' instead of analysing it from an intellectually distant position (Liebes & Katz, 1986, 1990). As Briggs (2010) explains, referential viewing usually 'involves closeness and identification' (p. 50) and emotional engagement (Ang, 1985; Buckingham, 1993; Jenkins, 1992; Liebes & Katz, 1986, 1990). Buckingham (1993) describes referential involvement as viewing the televisual text from 'inside' whereas critical distance means viewing it from 'outside'. Although some scholars argue that viewing television from 'outside' is necessary for learning, audience research shows that viewers learn by viewing television from 'inside', that is, through referential involvement, emotional engagement, empathy or identification rather than dispassionate, rational analysis (Buckingham & Bragg, 2003, 2004; Hall, 2009; Hinds, 1991; Jenkins, 1992; Noble & Freiberg, 1985; Noble & Noble, 1979; Parsemain, 2015; Tulloch, 2000; Tulloch & Lupton, 1997; Tulloch & Moran, 1986; Turner, 2010).

My aim in this article is to clarify what it means to be critical as a television viewer and to explain how it impacts televisual learning. I examine the relationship between critical media literacy and critical viewing and whether being critical facilitates or impedes learning. To do so, I use empirical data obtained through two focus group discussions that I conducted with eight viewers as part of a broader research project, which also included interviews with television professionals and textual analyses. The focus group discussions that I analyse in this article focus on the Australian soap opera *Home and Away* (Bateman, 1988-) but include comments and discussions about other programmes that my participants mentioned during our sessions. My study confirmed that although critical media literacy is necessary in order to learn from television, critical distance hinders learning. To solve this apparent contradiction, I propose to distinguish two modalities of audience response: *critical viewing*, which is a form of intellectual distance that is incompatible with learning *from* a television programme (although critically distant viewers can learn *about* the programme) and *critical involvement*, which is a form of proximity or connection with the televisual text that facilitates learning through critical thinking.

Televisual learning and critical media literacy

Media literacy is a set of knowledges and skills that allows audiences 'to access, analyse, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms' (Hobbs, 1998, p. 16). Although the phrase 'media literacy' also refers to basic cognitive skills, researchers tend to emphasise analytical and critical skills (Ashley, Lyden, & Fasbinder, 2012; Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 1998; Livingstone, 2011; Rogow, 2004). As Buckingham (2003) explains, 'literacy is not seen here merely as a kind of cognitive tool kit' but as 'a form of critical literacy' (p. 38). Similarly, the British Office of Communications (Ofcom) defines media literacy as follows:

> At a more advanced level it moves beyond from recognising and comprehending information to the higher order critical thinking skills such as

questioning, analysing and evaluating that information. This aspect of media literacy is sometimes referred to as "critical viewing" or "critical analysis". (Ofcom, 2011)

Historically, critical media literacy has been conceived as a protective shield against media influences. It has been defined as a way to discriminate against popular culture (Leavis & Thompson, 1933), within popular culture (Hall & Whannel, 1964), and to demystify the processes by which the media deliver ideology (Masterman, 1985). More recently however, critical media literacy has been defined not as a way to protect vulnerable audiences against the media but as a way to prepare and empower active audiences to make informed decisions autonomously (Buckingham, 2003).

Being critical is also considered necessary in order to learn from the media. Hartley (1999), who argues in *Uses of Television* that television is an informal teacher, insists on the importance of media literacy, which he defines as 'knowledge, critical thinking, and methodical reading or analytical practices' (p. 4). According to him, television is comparable to textbooks: like students who must be literate in order to learn from books, viewers must be media literate in order to learn from television. Hartley quotes Eco (1979) who writes in *Screen Education*: 'if you want to use television for teaching somebody something, you have first to teach somebody how to use television' (p. 15). Indeed, for Eco, learning is fundamentally linked to literacy and critical skills:

> The first duty of a teacher is, if not to say, "Don't trust me", at least to say, "Only trust me within reason". I think in fact that this attitude is one that every reasonable person takes when watching television. Television is the school book of modern adults, as much as it is the only authoritative school book for our children. Education, real education doesn't mean teaching young people to trust school. On the contrary, it consists of training young people to criticise school books and write their own school books. (p. 16)

In this view, learning from television does not mean trusting that it accurately represents reality but being able to read, understand, analyse and criticise it in order to gain knowledge. Brabazon (2006) makes a similar argument about the Internet. In 'The Google Effect: Googling, Blogging, Wikis and the Flattening of Expertise' she questions the assumption that the Internet can be used as a substitute for expert knowledge. Brabazon does not deny that the Internet can be used as a source of knowledge, but she reminds teachers and students that unlike academic sources, it offers no guarantee of expertise. Her main argument is that Internet users need Internet literacy in order to 'sort the trash from the relevant' (p. 158). In her view, media technology should be understood as 'the start of learning, not the end' (p. 163). This 'transparency problem' (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006, p. 14) applies to other forms of media. When defining any communication medium as an informal teacher, it is important to keep in mind that unlike

academic institutions such as schools and libraries, mainstream media offer no guarantee of expertise. Critical media literacy is crucial if any communication medium is used as informal site of teaching or learning.

Televisual learning and referential involvement

Media scholars often contrast 'critical viewing' with 'referential involvement'. Writing about soap operas, de Bruin (2008) formulates the difference as follows:

> When using a referential reading, viewers regard the soap as a manifestation of "real life", which allows them to make comparisons to their own lives. In a critical reading, viewers expose the "constructedness" of the soap, for example by commenting on the actors' performances, which directs them to look beyond the reality of the soap text. ('Theoretical Framework' section, para. 3)

Similarly, Cohen (2006) explains that:

> [Referential involvement] makes the text as an artefact (i.e. its authors, actors, producers, design etc.) invisible and [...] the viewer is engrossed in the world the text creates. In a referential reading, viewers accept the basic assumptions of the producers and imagine the events described in the text as if they were, or could be, real [...] Critical readers, on the other hand, resist the temptation to become involved with the text, and their emotional distance provides them with the ability to critique the show and resist its ideological message. (p. 191)

This critical positioning is usually associated with intellectual distance and sometimes with cynicism and mockery (Ang, 1985; Buckingham, 1993).

Audience research suggests that this type of critical positioning impedes viewers' learning. Many studies have shown that viewers learn through referential involvement rather than critical distance (Buckingham & Bragg, 2003, 2004; Hall, 2009; Hinds, 1991; Jenkins, 1992; Masanet & Buckingham, 2014; Noble & Freiberg, 1985; Noble & Noble, 1979; Parsemain, 2015; Tulloch, 2000; Tulloch & Lupton, 1997; Tulloch & Moran, 1986; Turner, 2010). Comparing children who watch the public broadcaster ABC with children who watch commercial television in Australia, Noble and Freiberg (1985) show that those who believe that television portrays reality learn from it. In contrast, the critical viewers are more cynical about television and do not perceive it as a reliable source of knowledge. Noble and Freiberg's conclusion is that children learn when they believe that what they see on television is real or realistic. In another study, Noble and Noble (1979) link learning to referential viewing by showing how some young Australians learn about relationships and gain social skills from the American sitcom *Happy Days* (Marshall, 1974-1984) because they

use it as a 'point of reference' (p. 18). Although the series is set in a different time and place,[1] those viewers compare the programme to their own lives; they perceive it as 'true to life' (p. 19) and they often have an 'illusion of intimacy' (p. 17) with the characters. More recently, Buckingham and Bragg (2003, 2004) and Masanet and Buckingham (2014) have demonstrated that the educational value of soap operas, comedies and teenage dramas depends on how realistic and plausible the storylines seem to young viewers: 'the educational value (or even the effectiveness) of fiction in this respect might be seen to depend upon the extent to which viewers judge it to be realistic' (Masanet & Buckingham, 2014, p. 3). If the storylines or characters are perceived as not believable or if the constructed nature of the programme is too obvious, young viewers distance themselves from it by criticising its lack of realism and resist its educational messages.

Studies that focus on factual television also indicate that viewers learn through referential viewing: Hall's (2009) reception study of reality programmes, for example, shows that viewers learn about human nature and behaviour when they believe that cast members are being authentic. Similarly, the study conducted by Buckingham and Bragg (2003, 2004) with young people in the United Kingdom indicates that talk shows are educational when viewers identify with the guests and emotionally engage with the content. When talk shows address a more ironic and playful viewer and encourage scepticism (by hiring actors as fake guests for example) the viewers become aware of the constructed nature of the programme and adopt a critical, distanced and dispassionate position, which hinders their learning; the programme is then perceived as 'funny' and the host's attempts at teaching are mocked or criticised. Their knowledge of production processes and commercial imperatives usually reinforces this critical positioning.

Although referential viewing and critical viewing are two contradictory modalities of response, these positions can be combined. In other words, viewers can (and often do) shift between referential involvement and critical distance (Ang, 1985; Buckingham, 1993; de Bruin, 2008; Hill, 2005; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Parsemain, 2015). Moreover, some scholars argue that both critical and referential viewing result in learning (Buckingham, 1993; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Masanet & Buckingham, 2014). Liebes and Katz (1990) and Buckingham (1993) for instance, claim that viewers learn from television by combining critical distance and referential involvement. According to Buckingham, some genres, such as soap operas, are educational precisely because they enable viewers to shift between these viewing positions. For Buckingham, the educational value of such programmes is directly linked to the variety of reading positions they offer: by shifting between referential involvement and critical distance, viewers become aware of different possible reading strategies, which extends their competences. My study investigates those claims by examining how critical viewing (and referential viewing) affects televisual learning.

This study's methodology
The empirical material of this article is part of a broader research project that investigates the pedagogy of two television programmes: the Australian version of the documentary

series *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Tait, 2008-) and the soap opera *Home and Away*. To understand how both programmes teach, I examined their production processes, their textual features and their reception by a small sample of adult viewers. I interviewed some of the programme makers, textually analysed the programmes and conducted two focus groups with four viewers each. Using the snowball sampling method, I recruited pre-existing groups of viewers through an intermediary. The first focus group included two pre-existing pairs: Wolfgang and Naomi, who are siblings and Marnie and Arya, who are friends. The second group consisted of four friends: Krista, Ms Goldblum, Lec and Junior.[2] As Daymon and Holloway (2002) explain, 'the advantage of choosing pre-constituted groups is that they are more natural, and therefore participants may be comfortable in each other's company' (p. 245). Similarly, Barbour and Schostak (2011) argue that pre-existing groups are better because they allow researchers to 'get as close as possible to the real life situations where people discuss, formulate and modify their views and make sense of their experiences as in peer groups' (p. 63). To reinforce this sense of familiarity, I ensured that the participants shared common characteristics such as age, nationality, educational and socio-economic level. My participants were between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, all Australians from middle socioeconomic status backgrounds living in Sydney. As Daymon and Holloway explain, homogenous groups create an 'immediate feeling of rapport', which 'can motivate individuals to contribute enthusiastically to group discussions' (p. 246).

Most of my participants knew *Home and Away* and had seen at least one episode before our focus group, except Ms Goldblum. This exception can be explained by the fact that Ms Goldblum recently migrated to Australia from South Africa, where the programme is not broadcast, whereas the other participants grew up in Australia and have had more opportunities to watch the programme, which has been broadcast on Channel Seven since 1988. Naomi, Lec and Krista were occasional or regular viewers when they were teenagers but Arya, Marnie, Wolfgang and Junior had only seen one or a couple of episodes in total. None of my participants were following it at the time of our discussion. Many reception studies of soap operas focus on fans or regular viewers (Ang, 1985; Baym, 2000; Geraghty, 1991; Hobson, 2003; Modleski, 1982; Tulloch & Moran, 1986). The advantage of examining fans' responses is that those viewers have extensive knowledge of the programmes and can discuss their characters and storylines in depth. But speaking to non-fans can also be useful since it allows diverse perspectives (including more negative responses) to emerge.

The environment (a large media room on a university campus) was made as informal as possible to ensure a relaxed atmosphere (Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005; Daymon & Holloway, 2002; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Episode 5426 of *Home and Away* (Duffy [Writer] & Raco [Director], 2011) was screened before the discussion as stimulus material to start the conversation. This episode, which was first broadcast on Channel Seven on 14 November 2011, was selected because the writers whom I interviewed were involved in its production and writing and because my textual analysis revealed that several of its storylines could be interpreted as educational. After the episode was screened, I asked my participants to describe their viewing experience, what they learnt from the episode, what

they thought other people could have learnt from it, and if (and why) learning from *Home and Away* was different from traditional classroom-learning or book-learning. Although the discussion focused primarily on *Home and Away*, they were encouraged to talk about how they learn from television in general.

Because of its small sample size, this reception study is limited. The audience perspective analysed here is only partial because it does not take into account a broader range of demographics nor does it include the perspective of fans. My participants, who were aged between twenty-five and thirty-five, may not be representative of *Home and Away*'s actual viewership: according to some of its producers and writers, *Home and Away* is largely 'teenage-focused' and is more appealing to adolescents. However, some of the producers also claim that the programme's target demographic ranges from sixteen-year-olds to thirty-nine-year-olds and that it is designed to appeal to parents as well as adolescents and young adults (news.com.au, 2011). Furthermore, despite its small sample size, this study provides relevant insights about televisual learning and opens up avenues for rethinking what it means to be critical as a viewer.

The first section below shows how my participants use their critical media literacy skills in order to evaluate and contextualise the 'lessons' taught by different television programmes, thus supporting the argument that being media literate is crucial in order to learn from television. However, being media literate does not necessarily lead to distance, scepticism or cynicism; in other words, critical media literacy is different from critical viewing. After establishing that critical media literacy is necessary in order to learn from television, I demonstrate that critical viewing hinders learning: based on my participants' responses to *Home and Away*, I show that being critically distant and interpreting a televisual text as unrealistic and unrelatable prevents viewers from learning from it. In the final section, I explore the difference between critical viewing (a form of scepticism and intellectual distance) and critical involvement, which combines media literacy and referential viewing.

The importance of being critical

The discussions that I conducted with my participants about televisual learning confirmed that critical media literacy is a necessary prerequisite in order to learn from television. Viewers must know and understand television, its forms and its genres in order to learn from it. This idea was summarised by Marnie, who explained how her knowledge and understanding of television genres influences her learning:

> Marnie: If it's something that is either a pure documentary or wrapped up as fact […] I have to feel like they've done a decent enough job of portraying the history in a factual way for me to think that I have learnt something rather than just thinking "that was a really good story". Because I know if it's presented not as a documentary, if it's presented as a story and a narrative therefore I can't rely on that as

my historical knowledge. I have to question that. [In *Who Do You Think You Are?*] I'm conscious of whether they're constructing a story only because this show is presented as non-fiction, it's presented as factual, it's not presented as a drama series. You know, Don Hany is in *Offspring*,[3][4] and when he's in *Offspring* you go "Okay well, this is fiction and I know I have to suspend disbelief" and you go into that mode of thinking and you just relax and just accept things that happen, even if they're completely off the wall insane. But a show where it's factual, I guess you look at it a bit more in a way that you would a newspaper article and deconstructing, well: is this the truth? They're presenting it as the truth, so I feel like I automatically have to question whether it is truthful and if you're in that frame of mind, then you start being a bit more aware of awkward moments or contrived moments.

Critical media literacy skills allow viewers to identify different televisual forms and genres and to distinguish fictional entertainment (which Marnie describes as 'narratives' or 'stories') from factual programmes. This type of distinction is crucial for learning because it allows viewers to contextualise and assess televisual content and to determine how they can use it as a source of knowledge. This is not to say that it is impossible to learn from fictional entertainment; rather, it suggests that learning from factual programmes involves different generic expectations. As Marnie's comment shows, critical skills also allow viewers to evaluate the accuracy and the reliability of factual programmes. Indeed, as Hill (2002, 2005) explains in her study of reality television, audiences' knowledge and understanding of generic conventions influence their readings of factual television and their perceptions of authenticity (for example, most reality programmes are considered inauthentic because they do not adopt news and documentaries' rhetoric of authenticity[5]). Marnie's comment about *Who Do You Think You Are?* also highlights the intrinsic link between critical media literacy and critical viewing: it is because of and through their knowledge and their understanding of television forms and genres that viewers are able to intellectually 'deconstruct' televisual texts and to 'question' their authenticity and reliability. In other words, it is because of and through their critical media literacy skills and analytical readings that viewers are able to view a programme with critical distance. However, a literate or analytical reading of television does not always lead to intellectual distance and cynicism, as I explain further below.

The focus group discussions provided other examples that support the argument that critical media literacy is a necessary prerequisite for televisual learning because it allows viewers to contextualise and assess what they see on television. For instance, Marnie jokingly said that she learns about the FBI and the CIA by watching the American crime drama *The Blacklist* (Bokenkamp, 2013-) but she also explicitly contextualised and critically evaluated the knowledge that she gains from it:

Marnie: In *The Blacklist,* I learn heaps about the FBI and CIA watching those shows [laughs]! It's not factual, I know it's not factual though! [laughs] It's artificial learning.

By pretending to believe that the fictional representations of the FBI and the CIA in crime dramas are accurate, Marnie implicitly poked fun at the imagined uneducated and media-illiterate viewers who learn incorrect lessons from television. Her critical media literacy skills, however, allow her to analyse these representations, which she interprets as superficially and loosely related to reality. Similarly, Krista, who said that she learns about social issues and human nature from the American drama *The Wire* (Simon, 2002-2008) conceded that this programme was only a fictional representation and one subjective 'interpretation' of American inner-city criminality and drug culture:

Krista: In *The Wire* I learn about blocks of people, and that a whole block becomes a community and that community gets really addicted to the drug system, and it starts as a young kid, and it's a spiral. And you learn about the cities. And it's fed from the top, from politics. So, even though it is total escapism for me because it's so far removed and I find it quite entertaining, I learn a lot about human nature and parts of the world where that is a reality, where drug culture is a reality for them, day in and day out. I feel like I know a lot more about what society is like. Even though it's only one interpretation, you know, seen through the lens of directors, but I feel like I know a lot more about what life would be like on the street. But I know it's not necessarily always an accurate interpretation.

Furthermore, some of my participants believe that other viewers who are not critical and media literate can be miseducated by television's 'bad' teaching. For example, Krista and Ms Goldblum worry that viewers who do not possess the necessary critical media literacy skills could be misinformed by the incorrect and unethical lessons taught by reality programmes like *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* (Seacrest, 2007-):

Krista: It's so bad that it's good because this show is teaching young women to aspire to having a shit ton of money for not really doing anything. What do they actually do? They don't do anything! [laughs]

Ms Goldblum: You don't need to work hard, you don't need to be talented.

Lec: Just be beautiful […]

Ms Goldblum: It's so scripted. Everything about that show is so scripted. They got writers and that show is so choreographed and planned.

	But people who aren't aware of that, they think that it's actually, genuinely achievable and it's genuinely, you know, that it is like, a feasible future for them. That's like…That is creepy.
Krista:	So you think it's bad?
Ms Goldblum:	But I know the lesson, it doesn't matter because I'm in no trouble of falling into it. It's the people who should learn the lesson who are the ones who are not learning. They're the ones who can't dissociate themselves from it. They can't see it.
Krista:	So you think that it's bad. That people could potentially take it seriously and learn the wrong things?
Ms Goldblum:	But I say shame on those people, you should be smarter, you should know better.

This type of responses exemplifies what communication scholars call the 'third-person effect' (Davison, 1983). These viewers assume that they ('I', 'we') have the necessary media literacy skills to critically analyse, understand, contextualise and assess the content of 'bad' reality programmes like *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* but that others ('them') 'who aren't aware' – that is, who are not media literate and critical - can be misinformed and miseducated by such programmes. In this discussion, the participants distanced and dissociated themselves not only from the programme but also from the imagined mass of media-illiterate viewers who supposedly learn the 'wrong' lessons from it. More importantly, these comments about *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* support the view that being critical is necessary in order to learn (the 'right' lessons) from television and to sort out television's educational content from its bad teaching, or in Brabazon's (2006) words to 'sort the trash from the relevant' (p. 158).

The importance of not being critical
Paradoxically, my focus groups also confirmed that being critical can hinder televisual learning. Here, I demonstrate that my participants did not learn from *Home and Away* because they viewed it critically instead of engaging with it referentially. My interviews with the writers and my textual analysis revealed that although it privileges entertainment over education, *Home and Away* aims to educate its audience about social and personal issues (such as domestic violence, corruption in politics, road safety, precarity, teenage pregnancy, bereavement, illness, first sexual experiences etc.) and to teach moral values and behaviours. But despite the writers' pedagogical intentions, the viewers who participated in my focus groups all agreed that *Home and Away* failed to teach them anything:

Lec:	They teach you nothing! […]

Marnie:	I don't know if there is anything to learn, really [laughs]. I can see what they're trying to make people learn from it but I don't think people would actually learn anything from it […]
Ms Goldblum:	I guess it's easy. That is mind-numbing, right?
Lec:	Oh, totally.
Junior:	Yeah.
Ms Goldblum:	It's not difficult, it doesn't ask anything of you…
Lec:	It's white noise.
Ms Goldblum:	Yeah, you don't have to make any contribution […] Now I have to say "insulting" I think it's the wrong word that I used. But, it's more feeding…
Lec:	Un-intelligence?
All:	[laugh]
Lec:	It's to have it on when you're doing other stuff.
Ms Goldblum:	It's background noise, yeah.
Lec:	And you do get fed a lot!

These viewers used their analytical skills to distance themselves from *Home and Away* in several ways: by criticising it; by mocking it (and its fans); by providing subversive readings of the text and its educational messages; and by showing their knowledge of the production process. It is important to note that this type of critical positioning is not necessarily a true reflection of viewers' actual viewing experience but is above all a discursive practice and a performance occurring in a particular social context (Buckingham, 1993; de Bruin, 2008). As Buckingham (1993) writes, 'being critical is a social, discursive, practice, not a state of mind' (p. 294). By 'deconstructing' and criticising soap operas, focus group participants perform as the 'smart self' for a social audience (the other participants and the interviewer) (de Bruin, 2008). Although the social context of the focus group does not create viewers' critical positioning, it is likely to enhance it.

The viewers were 'critical' in the sense that they were analytical and in the sense that they expressed disapproving judgments about the programme. The criticisms made against *Home and Away* concerned its quality and were conveyed through characterisations such as 'bad' (Arya, Naomi, Marnie, Wolfgang); 'not good' (Ms Goldblum); 'horrible' (Wolfgang); 'insulting' (Junior, Ms Goldblum); 'trash' (Junior); 'shit' (Arya); 'bullshit' (Ms Goldblum); 'like junk food' (Marnie); 'cringe worthy' (Wolfgang); 'lame' (Naomi, Wolfgang, Junior) and 'corny' (Wolfgang). They also distanced themselves from the programme through verbal mockery during the discussion and through laughter during the screening. When asked why they laughed during the screening, Marnie, Naomi, Wolfgang, Ms Goldblum and Junior all agreed that they laughed at the programme but not with it:

Marnie:	For me it was funny because it was bad […] And Alf is funny, he's such a bogan![6] But I don't think it was, you know, great comic humour, it was more like, "oh, no" kind of funny […]
Wolfgang:	In regards to laughing at it, I think it was because it was either so bad, or it was really, really corny […]
Naomi:	Yeah, I was kind of laughing because it was bad, just a bit lame […]
Junior:	I find it also hilarious at times, because you can make some jokes out of it.

Critical viewers also distance themselves from soap operas by distancing themselves from soap fans, who are often devalued, ridiculed, alienated and associated with the mass of ordinary viewers or feminised and associated with the stereotype of the gossip-loving housewife (Baym, 2000; Buckingham, 1993; Tulloch & Moran, 1986). Ms Goldblum illustrates this type of critical response. In the discussion below, she distances herself both from *Home and Away* and its imagined audience:

Ms Goldblum:	Because now I'm playing into the stereotype I think, but I picture, like, a really sad, old, adult woman. If I imagine who's watching this. She's alone, she's like, the typical housewife, doesn't work, stay at home mum, just completely, like, from another era. She's not a modern woman!
All:	[laugh]
Ms Goldblum:	If someone could learn something from it, that's the stereotype I imagine.

As Tulloch and Moran (1986) show in their reception study of the Australian medical soap opera *A Country Practice* (Davern, 1981-1994), viewers can also present themselves as critical by providing oppositional or subversive readings of the text. In my focus groups, Naomi and Wolfgang resist soap operas' dominant meanings by distorting their educational messages:

| Naomi: | I remember watching *Neighbours* as a kid and still having those moments when being like "oh alright, just sleep with him at the formal, I don't care!" Like, it's lame […] |
| Wolfgang: | I hope he dies in a car accident. That would be sick. Best thing that happens […] I hope she just goes and shags him or something. You want that. You want these things to happen. |

'These things' (the character dying in a car accident or losing her virginity at the high school formal) are imaginary story developments that aggressively challenge and disfigure the

educational messages (about road safety and first sexual experiences) that are encoded in soap operas like *Neighbours* (Watson, 1985-) and *Home and Away*. Finally, my participants distanced themselves by showing their knowledge of the production process. By demonstrating their awareness of the constructed nature of *Home and Away*, they positioned themselves as sophisticated, intellectually distant and critical (Buckingham, 1993):

> Arya: You see the constraints of producing a show every day, like how there's no wide shots because they can't show that there's actually nothing around what they're shooting [laughs]. They've only got ten extras [...]
>
> Lec: I can't imagine how they keep these things going, like having to churn out the episodes. It's such a small world, and these things create conflict. That's what's driving the story forward by, oh someone's gonna have a bad sexual experience at the formal, or someone's gonna have another car accident.

What is significant in these comments is that these viewers focused mainly on production processes: how the programme was written, filmed, how the actors performed etc. Arya's comment is an implicit critique of *Home and Away*'s low budget and production value. Lec also positioned herself as a critical viewer and performed as her 'smart self' by displaying her knowledge of the production process and of the writers' intentions and constraints.

The importance of realism and relatability

The main reason why my participants viewed *Home and Away* with critical distance – and therefore did not learn from it - is because they did not perceive it as realistic or relatable. Perceived realism and relatability are fundamental aspects of referential viewing. Lack of realism or relatability, on the other hand, is usually associated with critical viewing (Ang, 1985; Briggs, 2010; Buckingham, 1993; Cohen, 2006; Jenkins, 1992; Liebes & Katz, 1986, 1990). My textual analysis revealed that one the pedagogical techniques of *Home and Away* is to invite referential viewing and to encourage viewers to relate to the characters and the stories by using some of the codes and conventions of soap realism. The pedagogy of *Home and Away* is based on resonance and relatability and its 'implied audience' (Barker & Austin, 2000) must draw parallels between their lives and the characters' lives in order to learn from it. One of the reasons why the storylines may resonate with the viewers' lives is because the characters appear to live in the same present time as the audience (Baym, 2000; De Kosnik, 2013; Ellis, 2000; Hobson, 2003; Jordan, 1981; Longhurst, 1987). Indeed, soap operas often respond to real life events and integrate topical issues within their storylines. For long-term viewers, this effect of resonance is also enhanced by the fact that soap time mimics real time (De Kosnik, 2013; Hobson, 2003). Moreover, to invite referential involvement, soap operas focus on the everyday life of ordinary people and often depict

mundane activities in a realistic way (Hobson, 2003; Jordan, 1981; Livingstone, 1998; Longhurst, 1987; Tulloch & Moran, 1986). Furthermore, soap operas are considered realistic because they depict emotions in a way that is relatable: as Ang (1985) and Briggs (2010) observe, the characters' inner lives are designed to resonate with the viewers' inner lives and emotions. Fans usually view soap operas referentially: they perceive the characters and storylines as realistic and relatable and draw parallels between what happens in the programmes and their own lives (Ang, 1985; Baym, 2000; Hobson, 2003).

However, despite its generic and textual features that invite referential viewing, my participants perceived the programme as unrealistic and unrelatable. As the following conversation illustrates, the main criticisms made against *Home and Away* concerned its lack of realism:

Arya:	This is a show that you're laughing at all the points where it does not ring true. Because none of it does. Like, all the conversations, even the words that they use, the phrasing, like when she's talking about losing her virginity, "your special list", and just everything!
Marnie:	[laughs]
Arya:	Everything falls like a lead balloon and you laugh at it […]
Naomi:	They're not particularly complex characters; they are quite two-dimensional […]
Ms Goldblum:	It's somehow linked to reality but I just think the way they portray it is such bullshit.
Junior:	Yeah, it's pretty simple. They map out the issues in a very simple way. They set up good characters and bad characters.
Lec:	Well, because it is light and you know, just on the surface and 2-D and fluffy […] Characters are huge!
Junior:	They're so ridiculous.
Lec:	They're not your regular characters.
Krista:	They're a really thin…
Lec:	Two-dimensional.
Krista :	…two-dimensional, thin version of what a person is […] The things they do, I find them, they're really unrealistic. I don't feel like people act like that. And then it's like, why are they doing stupid things? I felt kind of agitated […] That was just annoying! And like, the characters were annoying, what they were doing what just so fake! […]
Ms Goldblum:	This is synthesized human emotions.
Lec:	It's plastic.

In this context, the adjectives 'huge' and 'thin' do not contradict each other since they were both used to emphasise the characters' lack of realism. Lec described the characters as 'huge' because she perceived their personality traits as exaggerated and caricatural. Krista described the characters as 'thin' because she considered that they lacked psychological depth and complexity – an opinion also conveyed by Naomi, Lec and Krista's use of the adjective 'two-dimensional'. Here, the programme is criticised for its lack of plausibility (a sense that the events depicted could have happened in the profilmic world), typicality (the impression that the characters or personae are representative of many people or of ordinary people), and emotional realism (the emotions depicted seem true to life and relatable) (Hall, 2003).

Because they perceived *Home and Away* as unrealistic, these viewers were unable to relate to the characters and to the storylines, that is, they were unable to make a referential connection between the programme and their own lives:

Arya: I think it's a version of Australianness that not a lot of Australian people, certainly not a lot of Australian people who live in Sydney can relate to. Like, the way that they talk and everything about it […]

Krista: I found it really un-relatable. I found it really unrealistic and it didn't mirror…Even though, the only thing that it mirrored for me was like, the discussion I've had with Jono, my fiancé, about the motorbike. But their response to it, and the way they handled that situation was so far removed from my discussion with him that for me it didn't trigger anything about relationships that made me think about him and our interaction […] I just couldn't relate to the way people dealt and interacted in their relationships.

Marnie compared *Home and Away* to the American comedy-drama *Girls* (Dunham, 2012-) which she considers more relatable and therefore more educational, even though the story of *Girls* is set in New York City:

Marnie: As we all said, none of us really felt that we related to any of the characters in *Home and Away* but a show like *Girls* perhaps, when I watched it, clicked a bit more as they fit more with my context, my age bracket, my living circumstances or economic circumstances. It is in the city, it isn't up the coast like *Home and Away* is […] I suppose that show [*Girls*] because you relate to it a bit more, promotes a bit more inward perspective, it encourages you to think about your own experiences and learn about your own experiences, in a way, to be a bit more introspective.

Marnie learns from *Girls* because she makes a direct connection between its characters and storylines and her own real life experiences. The un-relatability of *Home and Away*, on the other hand, makes learning impossible. Wolfgang explicitly formulated this link between the perceived lack of realism and relatability of the programme and its failure to teach:

Wolfgang:	Even though they're in our age bracket, they're so unrealistic those characters. They're so…
Naomi:	Two-dimensional.
Wolfgang:	I can't see how that show could give anyone anything in terms of education.

When asked whether other viewers could possibly relate to the programme and learn from it, my participants expressed reservations. Arya, Wolfgang and Ms Goldblum believe that most teenagers would find the programme's characters and storylines unrelatable:

Arya:	I'd be interested to know how popular it really is with teenagers. Because I feel like teenagers, at least I remember when I was a teenager, I was very sensitive to representations of teenagers that weren't authentic. And I feel that this is really inauthentic. And if I was a teenager, I'd think it was really naff.
Wolfgang:	Yeah I agree. I think teenagers could watch it, but they would say that it's lame, that "that's not cool, that's not how we are". Because it's not how teenagers are […]
Ms Goldblum:	If you're talking about kids nowadays, kids aren't having sex when they're eighteen, they're having sex when they're twelve! So, actually in *Home and Away*, they're behind, that's not the reality anymore. Kids now, I don't think this targets them at all. I think it misses the boat with them.

This is supported by a reception study that Hobson (2003) conducted with young offenders in the United Kingdom in 1996. Although the young viewers whom she interviewed enjoyed watching *Home and Away* (unlike my participants) they did not perceive the programme's characters and storylines as realistic or relatable. Like my focus group participants, the teenagers interviewed by Hobson viewed *Home and Away* with critical distance:

Steve:	Yes, but they are all like, it's all like these pretty people, like with the mothers, they try to make out they are like us […]
All:	Yes, stereotyping!
Rudy:	Everything's all cushy, like there's no one there to sign on the dole. [Laughs] They all get jobs like, and everybody's like willing to help

	everybody else, you know what I mean [Laughter from all the boys]
DH:	So do you think that it's nothing like what life is like here?
Rudy:	No. It's a paradise there, imagination – what, living there, next to the beach, living next to a beach, mm, paradise, paradise. (Hobson, 2003, p. 192)

Although *Home and Away*'s central focus is on teenage delinquents, it fails to resonate with the actual experiences of those real teenage delinquents. These viewers consider the programme unrelatable because they perceive the characters as stereotypical and because the situations depicted do not reflect their own lives and personal circumstances (which may be partly due to their geographical and socio-cultural contexts, that is, to the fact that they live in the United Kingdom and not 'next to a beach' in Australia). Although Hobson's study does not focus on viewers' learning, it is possible to hypothesise that despite the educational messages encoded in *Home and Away*, those young British viewers did not learn from it because they did not relate to its characters and storylines.

Critical involvement

Critical viewers can be entertained – sometimes through responses like mockery or irony (Ang, 1985) - but many reception studies, including my analyses of the reception of *Home and Away*, show that they are unlikely to learn, particularly when they interpret the programme as unrealistic, unrelatable or inauthentic. However, being critical also appears to be necessary in order to learn from the media. To resolve this apparent contradiction, it is useful to distinguish critical viewing from critical involvement. Critical viewing is a form of intellectual distance that involves distrust and often mockery of the programme – and in the context of televisual teaching, distrust and mockery of the teacher. As some scholars point out, this type of critical response may open up possibilities in terms of learning *about* the programme (how it was made or what it tries to teach for example) (Buckingham, 1993; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Masanet & Buckingham, 2014). But because they distrust the text/teacher, critical viewers are unlikely to learn *from* it and *with* it.

Critical involvement, on the other hand, is a form of intellectual proximity or connection with the text, which combines critical, literate analysis *and* trust. When critically involved, viewers exercise their critical and analytical abilities but still accept the text as authentic or realistic and as a reliable source of knowledge. Critical involvement is a form of referential viewing whereas critical viewing is the opposite. Critical involvement is a referential response because critically involved viewers still 'accept the basic assumptions of the producers and imagine the events described in the text as if they were, or could be, real' (Cohen, 2006, p. 191). This is illustrated by Krista's literate reading of *The Wire* or by Marnie's statement about *Who Do You Think You Are?*: 'I have to feel like they've done a decent enough job of portraying the history in a factual way for me to think that I have learnt something'. Here, Marnie's response involves both critical analysis *and* referential

viewing. She can trust factual programmes and therefore learn from them if and when she critically evaluates them as reliable sources of knowledge. It is through and because of her critical skills that she is able to view these programmes referentially, to trust them and to learn from them. As this example shows, critical, literate analysis does not necessarily lead to critical distance; and a referential reading of television - in which the viewer accepts the text's 'reality' or authenticity – is not necessarily an illiterate or uneducated reading. This is also apparent in previous audience studies in which viewers appear to engage with programmes both from a media-literate *and* a referential position (Buckingham & Bragg, 2003, 2004; Masanet & Buckingham, 2014). In Masanet and Buckingham's (2014) reception study of the British teenage drama *Skins* (Elsley & Brittain, 2007-2013) for example, young fans are able to critically analyse the text while also engaging with it referentially:

> *Skins* was interpreted as broadly realistic by many of these young people. Yet behind these judgements lie some more critical observations about its plausibility (its necessary tendency towards exaggeration), as well as a clear understanding of its fundamentally fictional, constructed nature. (p. 8)

The distinction between critical viewing and critical involvement (and the correlation between referential viewing and critical involvement) was best illustrated by my participants' discussion about *The Gruen Transfer* (Denton & Casimir, 2008-), [7] an Australian panel programme about advertising:

Marnie: Speaking of ads, I just thought of something about learning from TV. Shows like *The Gruen Transfer,* I find I really enjoy that show and I really enjoy the way that they break down the ads. I mean, all of us I think we're the kind of people who watch things with one eye absorbing it, and one eye in that critical mode, and shows like that appeals to me because it teaches you how to break down the ads, how to read between the lines and figure out how it's constructed, how it's contrived.

Interviewer: *So it addresses you as critical? It's not just trying to teach you something by manipulating you but they know you're critical and so they're going to teach you how to be more critical?*

Marnie: Yes.

Naomi: And they're open about what they're doing I suppose. You don't feel like you have to have that critical part of your mind on because you feel like they are showing you everything that's there.

Wolfgang: You're on the same team.

Marnie: Yeah, so I think that in a way it teaches people who are naturally critical of what they watch, it teaches you even more things that you can look for to be critical.

For these three participants, watching *The Gruen Transfer* is a learning experience because they view it referentially rather than critically. Based on their analytical reading of the programme, they accept the text/teacher as real and authentic and they trust it as reliable source of knowledge. More importantly, this discussion shows that Marnie, Naomi and Wolfgang are not critically distant but critically involved: they can be critical *with* the programme (as Wolfgang said, 'You're on the same team') instead of being critical *of* it. Through referential viewing, trust and critical involvement, they learn from and with the programme, which increases their knowledge, critical thinking and media literacy skills. Critical viewing (being critical *of* a programme) creates intellectual distance, which hinders learning, whereas referential viewing and critical involvement (being critical *with* a programme) creates an intellectual exchange, which facilitates learning.

Conclusion

This study challenges the idea that viewers learn from television by combining referential viewing and critical viewing (Buckingham, 1993; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Masanet & Buckingham, 2014). It shows that viewers must view a programme referentially in order to learn from it; they must trust that it is an authentic or realistic representation of the world and an accurate source of knowledge. Critical viewers who distrust a programme and who do not perceive it as authentic or realistic may learn about a programme but they do not learn from it and with it. Unlike the viewers who participated in my study, soap fans usually view soap operas referentially: they perceive the characters and storylines as realistic and relatable and draw parallels with their own lives (Ang, 1985; Baym, 2000; Hobson, 2003). Based on my findings, it is possible to hypothesise that regular viewers and fans of soap operas like *Home and Away* learn from those programmes because (or when) they view them referentially. Their responses are likely to be more aligned with the writers' pedagogical intentions and the textual features.

These findings have implications not only in terms of televisual learning but also in terms of televisual teaching. Media professionals who wish to educate their audience should aim to convey a sense of authenticity or realism (depending on generic formats), which is crucial to viewers' referential involvement and to their learning. Although this aspect of televisual pedagogy was not mentioned by the television professionals whom I interviewed, my textual analyses of *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *Home and Away* revealed the different ways in which television can signify the real to invite learning. For example, documentary series like *Who Do You Think You Are?* can signify actuality and authenticity by using the codes and conventions of the documentary genre (Parsemain, 2015) and soap operas can use the conventions of soap realism to create an effect of 'resonance' that is, to encourage viewers to relate to the characters and to the storylines. The case of *Home and Away* shows that fictional programmes (which are not as directly and as obviously linked to reality as factual programmes) must work to signify the authentic and the real and to encourage referential involvement in order to educate their audiences.

Although it may seem disconnected from everyday life reality, a science-fiction programme, for example, may be educational if it is emotionally or psychologically realistic and resonates with viewers' real-life emotions, experiences or situations. Nonetheless, signifying the real does not systematically guarantee learning since viewers are active interpreters whose responses cannot be predetermined by textual features nor by programme makers' pedagogical intentions.

This study also shows that being critical does not necessarily impede televisual learning. The original argument that I have made in this article is that there are two different ways to be critical as a television viewer: viewers can be critical *of* television by intellectually distancing themselves from the text, deconstructing it, criticising it, and/or mocking it; this modality of response - which is usually known as 'critical viewing' - hinders learning. But viewers can also be critical *with* television, especially when it encourages them to use their analytical and critical thinking skills. This modality of response (which my participants discussed in relation to documentaries, *The Gruen Transfer* and *The Wire*) and which I labelled 'critical involvement', is a form of referential viewing that facilitates learning through literate reading and critical thinking. Critically involved viewers use their intellectual and analytical skills but they still accept the programme as an authentic and reliable source of knowledge about the world. It is through critical analysis that critically involved viewers are able to view a text referentially, to engage with it intellectually and emotionally and to learn from it. This distinction between critical viewing (being critical *of* television) and critical involvement (being critical *with* television) is significant because it affects televisual learning and possibly other modalities of audience response such as entertainment and engagement.

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Notes:

[1] Noble and Noble's participants lived in Australia in the 1970s whereas the action of *Happy Days* takes place in the American city of Milwaukee in the 1950s.

[2] Their aliases were self-selected.

[3] The episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?* that was screened as part of our focus group session featured the Australian actor Don Hany.

[4] *Offspring* (Oswald, 2010-) is an Australian comedy-drama series broadcast on Channel Ten featuring Don Hany.

[5] Although *Who Do You Think You Are?* uses some of the codes and conventions of the documentary, some of my participants were not persuaded by its rhetoric of authenticity. Those sceptical viewers perceived the programme as contrived and compared it to reality television. Wolfgang, who was the most cynical and critical toward the programme's truth claims, explicitly identified it as 'reality TV' (Parsemain, 2015).

[6] 'Bogan' is an Australian pejorative slang word used to describe a person from a lower working class background.

[7] The Gruen transfer, named after the Austrian architect Victor Gruen, refers to the moment when consumers entering a shopping mall are disoriented by an intentionally confusing layout, slow down, and lose track of their initial intention.