



# PAPER 19

The Qual remix

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### Thesis

The process known as re-mixing is has become a staple of popular music over the last twenty years. The remix has arisen from advances in recording technology, it is now possible to edit, augment and re-process original recordings in any way imaginable. Sometimes a re-mixed tune will scarcely resemble the original track as producers and DJs incorporate radical new elements and effects into the mix. The remix process does not recognise the original artist's intentions or authority as paramount, but instead uses the track as inspiration for hybridisation, experiment and improvisation.

However, the music industry was very different thirty years ago. In the age of singer-songwriters the artist would compose and perform his own material on the live stage. We would argue that qualitative research is still in the singer-songwriter phase, that the moderator is positioned as the all-powerful auteur director-creator, immune to any competing or conflicting visions of the world that do not emanate directly from his field-work gigs.

In this paper we are arguing that the moderator's authority should no longer be central to qualitative research. The live mixing of reality by the ethnographic DJ, along with the studio-desk techniques of semiotic and literary producers, can re-frame qualitative findings in radical ways. Thus the qualitative event becomes a source of inspiration for other disciplines to remix; by de-authorising the moderator's role a space is created for others to significantly augment the original material, by bringing new insights and contexts into the mix.

This is not a story of four projects for the price of one – which would have proved interesting but prohibitively expensive for all but the largest of clients. We believe that adopting this new, hybrid approach will result in better work while retaining a basis in existing discussion group methodologies. Such improvisational collaboration can be adopted without turning research budgets into telephone numbers.

And this remix was generated from one of the most controversial and difficult real life projects we could imagine: the challenge of changing the binge drinking culture of young lads aged 18-24 for a major drinks client.

### What's so special about moderators?

This paper came about because a qualitative researcher wondered why it was always up to (or down to) him. Why does the orthodoxy of qualitative research, fast transferring from an oral culture to a written one, still assume unquestioningly that the moderator is the analyst is the editor? A fast rewind of the literature of qualitative research reveals the same picture. Whether following the *cognitive* model which assumes that respondents' comments can largely be taken at face value or the *conative* model where meaning and interpretation are given much more weight using the terminology coined by Mary Goodyear, there is still a basic assumption that the work of analysis and interpretation will be undertaken by the moderator who has sole responsibility for how the project is analysed and interpreted.

And the latter day practice of importing hybrid methodologies in recent years under the label of bricolage, still treats these new approaches as tools for the individual researcher, who retains ultimate control over how they are applied and when their use should be discounted.

"Qualitative market researchers traditionally research consumers and this has been at the root of our authority. The idea that we can represent or 'know' the consumer better than the client is what gives us the right to advise clients on their business. It is taken for granted that we gain this knowledge through professional interviewing and analysis of what people say. The biggest opportunity raised by bricolage is to redefine the root of this professional authority to the benefit of both clients and suppliers." *Ereaut Imms Admap Dec 2002*

Which is why this particular qualitative researcher, sometime experimenter with ethnographic techniques and semiotic wannabe, invited specialists from 3 other disciplines to work with him on the analysis of a qualitative research project. The disciplines reflected the breadth of perspectives now available to clients buying in market research.

### Binge drinking and how to stop it

The team sought a project where the use of these complementary approaches would be particularly useful. And were briefed by a major drinks company to look at ways of preventing binge drinking. Binge drinking has become an increasing issue for government policy, law and order, the medical profession and the drinks companies themselves. In a 2003 Home Office study, 48% of men aged 18-24 admitted to being intoxicated more than once a month. The figure for women was 31%. And for both men and women a further 40% admitted to getting drunk on a regular basis. The client had run their own qualitative study using paired depths in August of 2003. The conclusion of the study was that it would be very difficult to persuade 18-24 year old young men in full time work to drink more responsibly. Instead the study recommended that initially young women be targeted using a variety of approaches including advertising. So the task given to the team was to tackle the young male drinking die-hards to see if they could find an alternative solution.

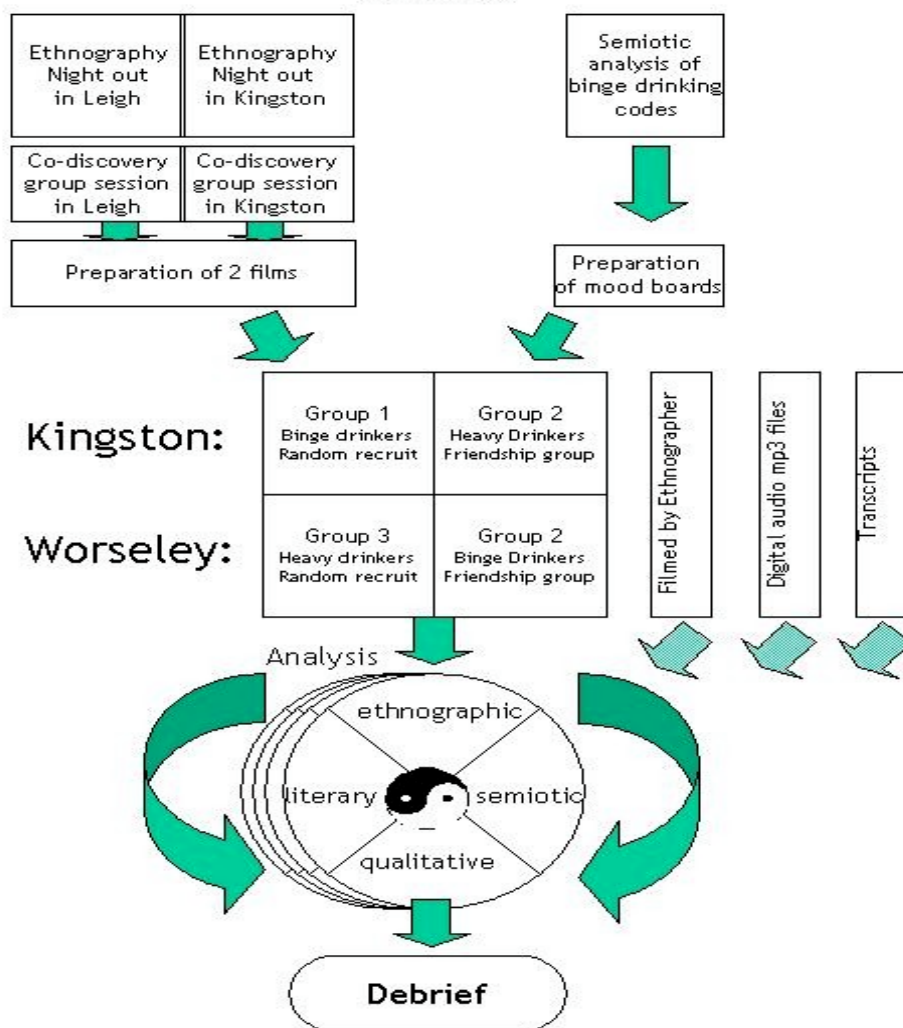
The client company is well used to drawing on many different disciplines to complement research. However they warned that there was a tendency for different disciplines to generate different and mutually incompatible conclusions! Or to paraphrase the client: "You'll have your time cut out keeping all these cats in the bag!" We resolved this methodologically because unlike previous studies where the different disciplines had worked from their own sources, here the analysts agreed to use the content from the research groups as a primary information source. By

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insisting that everyone used the same sources and by ensuring that the thinking of each of the analysts as well as their prejudices and presuppositions were clearly articulated, it became much easier to arrive at conclusions, which were mutually supportive rather than exclusive!

## Methodology

Fig 1 Anti - Binge Drinking Project Research Structure



At the start of the project ethnography and semiotic analysis was carried out in order that some of the outputs could function as stimulus material.

Two films were made over a weekend in Kingston Surrey and Leigh outside of Manchester. Friendship groups were recruited and filmed on the Friday night from the point where they left the house of the main subject until the closing of the nightclub at the end of the night. The following morning a co-discovery session was held at the home of the subject – and the friendship group reconvened to be interviewed about the night before using a rough cut of film. This session was edited down onto the soundtrack of each film to be used as stimulus within the research.

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We used an initial piece of semiotic analysis on the codes of binge drinking as a framework for the discussion guide and to brief out mood boards which reflected basic codes of excess, the motivation for binge drinking, archetypal drinking heroes and the drinking context. This initial semiotic analysis showed very clearly why a strategy promoting moderation could not be effective because of the number of established codes, that moderation would cut across.

Substantial work had already been carried out in this area: the research project carried out by the client and the study carried out by MORI on behalf of the Home Office in February of 2003. In the light of this work we were concerned not to reinvent the wheel. We chose to focus on the internal motivation for giving up binge drinking. What we observed from those studies we had read was that the first rule about drinking appeared to be denial and displacement – that binge drinking was a social problem which it was up to other people to solve by changing licensing laws, by providing more policing, by providing late night transport, by challenging the drinks companies, by abolishing drinks advertising. One of the studies paid particular attention to how drunkenness was viewed by other people. But there was little coverage of the internal motivation, the reasons why people might chose to alter their own behaviour. So within the discussion guide particular attention was given to the means by which respondents controlled the pace of the binge, the advice they would give to younger siblings, and lastly to imagine a retrospective of from their mid 20s of how their drinking would have changed from the present.

Four groups were recruited in London and outside Manchester close to where the binge films had been made. Groups were made up of a combination of heavy drinkers consuming 5 or more pints a session and friendship groups who admitted to going out with the express intention of getting drunk. The groups were filmed and recorded using digital audio from which transcripts were made. The ethnographer used the video material for analysis. The semiotician used video. The literary analyst and the moderator worked from the transcripts and the audio recording.

### What the ethnographer saw

Ethnography is all about trying to understand how products, brands and services fit into people's lives. Using anthropological techniques, ethnographers live with people and film them. Those unfamiliar with ethnography think that I am looking for nuggets of out of the ordinary behaviour on which we I build some kind of trend. In reality it is the opposite. It is a about making the ordinary extraordinary - by capturing the everyday realities and decision processes which affect how people respond to new ideas and products. My major concern when approaching this project was how helpful group research would be – I would favour observation over discussion groups every time because subjects are confronted by their actual behaviour.

My remit was to look at the behaviour of respondents in the group discussions themselves and to do this I drew on filmmakers who regularly work on ethnographic projects to film the groups as they happened. But for me it was essential that to look at binge drinking as it happened. Conventionally I would work over a period of several days with a particular subject. The binge-drinking project worked somewhat differently in that I commissioned the making of two films where a filmmaker filmed a group of lads on a night out. And because we were working with a group of drinkers we chose to involve the entire group in the co- discovery interview the morning after the night before. The co-discovery interview was edited down and put as a soundtrack to the films, which were used as stimulus in the discussion groups. These

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films came to be known as the binge films because of what transpired. In both films, drinkers alternate between chasers and beers drinking against the clock. The drinkers amuse themselves by trying to spike the drinks of the unwary, texting on their mobile phones to pull and play several girls at a time to have a sure fire result (or two) at the end of the night. And picture messaging has a unique role as recording device of the success of the night out.

This was a first. Conventionally I make films for clients – not for consumer groups. It was interesting how showing the films at the start of the groups created an impetus that drove the subsequent discussion. Showing the Kingston film to the Manchester groups, there were clear differences: the London drinkers had more money to spend, but there were also many parallels – the value of the films lay in being able to draw attention to the commonalities. Similarly, showing the Leigh film to the London groups got straight to the rules of the binge where the primary reason for meeting is to get drunk, and those who have had too much can be left to fend for themselves.

In the last group two of the respondents were among the original subjects who had made the binge film and been through the co-discovery – all those in this last group knew the town well, and many of them featured in the film. Showing them the film of a typical night out swiftly led into a comparison between the binge and other nights out in Leigh, how Leigh compared with other drinking destinations in the vicinity. And there was an extended discussion about the violence that frequently accompanies the binge. We couldn't have raised these issues within the film making unless we had witnessed a brawl ourselves while filming. But using the film in conjunction with the discussion groups made it possible to raise related issues around the binge.

The danger with a film viewed in isolation is that we lose the context of how the original participants would view it – which is why even after co discovery there are often more follow up sessions with subjects – which hasn't been possible here because of time constraints. But as one of those in the Leigh film said ruefully at the end of the last group. "If my mother saw this she'd kill me!" A salutary reminder that while we were making the films to explore the general characteristics of binges, for this individual it was extreme behaviour (how ever many times it happened) which he would find it difficult to justify to friends and family when sober. The research group helped us to frame the activity shown within the films.

Another benefit of making the ethnographic films was that because we chose to start filming at the respondent's house we were able to define the binge in much wider terms than drinking in pubs and clubs. There is always a danger that with a major drinks company as a client, the project would frame binge drinking in terms of what happened on licensed premises. But a lot of drinking happened before the subjects left home and went to the pub because of lack of money and uncertainties about whether they would be allowed into pubs, They also frequently carried supplies with them to ensure that they could maintain the pace of the binge even when moving between venues or waiting to get served. It was also interesting that drinking stopped after the clubs closed – relatively little was drunk in the clubs because of the expense – and no drink was consumed at home afterwards.

In summary I was reassured by the way this project worked. By making films separately and prior to the groups we were able to study people's behaviour in a way that didn't run the risk of pre-conditioning or contaminating group respondents. And the ethnographic material proved very powerful later within the group discussion context. As ethnography comes into the mainstream of UK marketing practice, there

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is a real risk that clients confuse ethnography with ethnographic techniques. I believe that the distinction between the two continues to be important.

### What the semiotician decoded

Semioticians have always had problems with The Truth. Semiotics, and its joyously sceptical bedfellows post-structuralism and post-modernism, suggests that language and symbolism cannot simply mirror reality. But, as language and symbolism are the only tools currently available to humans for communicative purposes, we therefore find ourselves a bit stuck when trying to pin down the absolutely authentic.

And this is no bad thing. Measures of absolute certainty have always been the hallmark of the wicked — and history informs us that those who invoke an absolute authority derived from an implacable sense of authentic truth have traditionally caused far more human misery than those who dither, doubt or simply can't be arsed.

So it is certainty, an inane positivistic belief that you can actually know stuff, which is the true enemy of human happiness. Instead, we should seek to build models of reality, to construct relative systems of understanding that help us do useful things. Semiotics is one means of doing this — a way of describing the world in terms of fluid relationships between signs, codes, discourse and power. In semiotics we are modelling reality, and thus acknowledging the 'truth' of our relationships with culture — we don't move vertically towards 'higher truth' but instead live in an endlessly horizontal world of shifting signification. Some of this signification may feel more real to us than other stuff, but that's hardly the point. Our feelings and attitudes to the world are derived through representation, and it is those forms of representation themselves that allow us to play with and understand a certain vision or version of reality, rather than an individual's supposedly authentic responses to these cultural inputs.

One of the central paradoxes of the mainstream marketing and research world is its affectation of positivism — that is to say it purports to provide an authoritative account of reality "what people really think and feel". This is paradoxical because it is precisely the creation of the market as the governing feature of contemporary life that has dissolved even the illusion of authentic reality through experience. But the discipline of marketing — with its campaigns, targets, strategy, fieldwork and war-games — echoes the military positivism of traditional warfare.

So, given this conventional union between the exercise of power and ownership of the modes of authenticity it is unsurprising that market research has usually sought to ally itself to the traditions of positivism, truth and the undeniably knowable. But in seeking to know what people think, market research has often been pursuing a costly chimera.

Qualitative research has been one of the main culprits in this wild goose chase. While qualitative research may offer productive models of reality, it has always been confused with the pure reflection of absolute truth. After all, argue the protagonists, what could be more authentic than getting the truth from the horse's mouth?

The problem, of course, is that the horse's mouth is dependent on language, which has never been a good means of accessing genuine authenticity.

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The anti binge project brought a number of problematic issues inherent within qualitative research to the fore. Most strikingly, for a methodology that has promised so much consumer authenticity, the entire premise of the discussion group is deeply codified and ideological. Far from being a transparent medium from which the truth is elicited it is instead a complex construct whose mechanisms impinge upon all who participate.

It's no big revelation to point out that the group research environment is an artificial one. Bringing people together to discuss in depth issues about brands or products, guided and interrogated by the moderator, is not a natural social event. (Of course no social event is ever truly natural in the semiotician's eyes, so perhaps we could let this pass.)

However it's clear this particular social construct brings unique codes in to play. For example, middle-class graduate respondents may see echoes of the tutorial or seminar. While this may allow them to be more confident in their self-expression it also places the moderator in a pedagogical position. The desire to please to the moderator/tutor, as figure of bourgeois authority, is never far away.

For those with no experience of seminar formats (who probably form a majority of respondents) the event is harder to codify. There is of course a growing awareness of the methodologies of research groups among the general public — and on this basis the idea of the Virgin respondent is rather ridiculous. Moreover, the conduits of power between moderator and respondents differ from the bourgeois model of relative respect.

The moderator here represents a kind of snooping authority figure, a social worker who, it is implied, may put your children into care if you proffer the wrong comments about Daz. Of course the origins of group research, in group therapy, are not so far away from the practices of modern social work. The format itself therefore echoes that of Alcoholics Anonymous — that the individuals who speak have some kind of problem or 'issue' as the Californians would put it. All of this is pre-figured by the notion that individuals are psychologically unified entities, able to discourse with fluidity, transparency and clarity on the subject of the day. But ultimately, the hidden codes of group research create the respondent as victim, and the moderator as the means of solution. The fact that respondents rarely derive any psychological benefit from a discussion about ASDA merely exacerbates the sense of victim hood.

Ultimately then, group research is often about the posh talking to the common, and with all the traditional British class anxieties that this entails. The respondent becomes a victim, an emotionally needy soul striving for an answer to please the moderator, but unsure of what that could possibly be. The traditional mantra "No wrong answers here" cannot stave off 400 years of social and cultural constructions around meaning and power.

It's clear that the responses of the respondent are modelled forms of behaviour, and that the process of qualitative research needs complementary forms of analysis to re-frame the discourse away from a discredited authenticity. Clients need to be made aware that what we seek is not The Truth, but instead a useful model of attitudes and behaviour that can be manipulated in productive ways.

The truth issue becomes more significant when we consider the issue of mis-recruitment. For practitioners and clients this disrupts the conceptual purity of the

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horse's mouth view of qualitative research. Surely people who have lied about preferring Uncle Ben's to Dolmio Pasta Sauces cannot be trusted. Of course they can't, but neither can the 'authentic' respondent be seen as a validation of truth. Paradoxically, mis-recruited respondents can actually deliver a closer take on cultural codes. The false respondent is aware of his or her infidelity to the process, and creates a self-conscious report around the issues derived from knowledge of the codes and customs associated with a given discourse. The 'proper' respondent meanwhile, is less aware of the artifice involved in re-presenting her thoughts to the moderator. Therefore, the de-authored respondent, the one who shouldn't be there, creates a more useful model of a scene than one who lives within it and is sought out to communicate her direct experiences. This may not always be beneficial, but on occasion it could certainly let some lazy recruiters off the hook.

Let's move briefly on to the project itself: a client sponsored exploration of issues around binge drinking. My task was, not unconventionally for semiotics, was to provide some context and direction for the groups prior to the fieldwork. This is often a useful way of getting underneath the surface signification around an issue, and offering some solutions that would be unlikely to be proposed unprompted by consumers.

I therefore developed some basic oppositions around control and chaos, about the Romantic Self and about the emotional lack to which alcohol seems to be the answer in many Northern European communities.

Secondly, and more unusually, I was also asked to examine both the ethnography and the research groups and comment upon them. This worked, as each discourse was able to comment on and inform the other.

I should confess that I privileged the ethnographic work over the group discussions. There was undoubtedly more meat in the ethnographic study for a semiotician to digest. And there was a very different level of performance between the subjects in the binge films and the group respondents. Whereas group research can be an alienating experience for many (or a comfortably, if inappropriately, recognisable one for others), ethnographic research privileged consumers in a way that made them heroes rather than victims. The general understanding of the modes of contemporary fly-on-the-wall TV shows suggested that participants in ethnography knew the score and were comfortable within its parameters. They knew how to perform for the cameras, even if that performance consisted of specific lack of self-consciousness before the ethnographer. Of course the addition of alcohol in this project meant that obliviousness came easier still to the participants.

But overall the presence of a camera meant that the participants felt culturally valued. It was easier for them to act out their narrative rather than trying to deliver it orally. They felt important and interesting, rather than the uneasy glum-faced embarrassment of many qualitative respondents. The ethnography clearly showed the intensity of the binge drinking ritual — it's clear teleological narrative towards the rule of disorder, the consummation of becoming truly 'battered'. This intensity is mirrored by the progression of drinking environments through the night, from quiet bar to noisy bar to nightclub. The discourse powers the participants along in a panic-driven rush to get drunk as fast as possible. In the Kingston film this was mediated by strong social and emotional bonds between the drinkers, while in the Leigh excerpt the lads were merely 'drinking buddies'. Untethered by strong emotional bonds

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between each other they formulated a 'last man standing' project, as each member of the troupe fell off the edge as the night progressed.

The saddest and strangest moment on the ethnographic film was, in my opinion, the occasion wherein one of the incredibly inebriated heterosexual Leigh lads pretended to dry hump his mate in the bar. The moment was denied in the research group by one of the lads ("that doesn't happen often"), so shamed was he by the animalistic mindlessness excess of his action. The dry humping moment was something that would never be declared openly in a discussion group context, but was demonstrated by the ethnographic technique to be an actual occurrence. It therefore seems to me that ethnography offers a tempered mirror to behaviours (as opposed to reality) that research groups could never undertake.

Dry humping aside, from a semiotic perspective it was clear that the drinking ritual was planned and purposeful, it was 'emphatic' to use the term in its technical sense. It was planned with a military precision, which oddly fell apart once the battle had commenced. Both the Leigh and Kingston filmed experiences shared this purposeful nature — leading me to suggest, with a typical oppositional thinking beloved of all semioticians — that the drinking experience should be framed as purely social or 'phatic'. As in Mediterranean cultures, this would frame drinking as part of everyday flow, as opposed to the definitive Friday night blowout where drunkenness had to be achieved by any means necessary. If drinking culture could be re-framed as more frequent but less intense, then the concept of binge drinking might generate less appeal.

We must also address the client's own semiotics. Lots of drinks advertising attempts to mirror the intensity and 'emphatic' nature of the big night out — whether it is the excessive desire codes of a Carling or the banal sexual innuendo of WKD. Indeed, few drinks brands stray far from the hallucinogenic fantasy of the unconscious, of codes of heightened desire or the smart manipulation of events for personal survival and gain. If the drinks companies are serious about binge drinking they must seek alternatives to binge advertising — eschewing the intense codes of transformation and heightened desire for expressions of relaxed, easy, ambient drinking experiences.

But all is not lost for group research. Instead, practitioners and clients must be aware of the limitations problematic within the methodology — and use it to model reality, rather than simply reflect it. This involves a de-centring of the power of the moderator as the auteur — the director-creator, as a site of authentic transmission. There must be a conscious rejection of the guru-dom that is implicit in the way the moderator's role is construed whatever their level of experience. The moderator must become fallible and impinged upon by complementary methodologies such as semiotics, ethnography and discourse analysis. None of these methodologies can lay claim to re-duplicate the authentic truth, but the models created by their energetic interplay can provide new ways of framing people's relationships with the market.

## What the literary critic read

The semiotician's insight that market research is fiction, not authentic truth, is no surprise to literary critics, who see fictions wherever they look. The boundary between literary criticism and semiotics is often blurred, but critics bring to bear their own specific expertise: they read cultural products through categories (metaphor, plot, characterization etc.) defined in literary analysis; and their "close reading" complements the broad brushstrokes more typical of semiotic analysis, revealing

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how a text's contradictions and hesitations are symptoms of broader issues. Sometimes this symptomatic close reading is called "deconstruction."

Clients should not be concerned that the reports they are presented are fictions. In this "dream economy," manufacturers, advertisers, and consumers alike depend upon and interpret their world(s) through strategies borrowed from literary fiction. But uncertainty as to what *kind* of fiction is being woven may hinder an evaluation and understanding of the focus group and its market research product. The literary category to define different *kinds* of fiction is "genre."

Different genres demand different reading strategies. We have different expectations of a romantic comedy than of a hard-boiled detective novel, for instance. So if we are unsure as to the genre to which qualitative market research belongs, then we will be unable to evaluate it properly. A literary approach, emphasizing the question of genre, helps clients make most use of the research written, and to understand the limits and functions of the stories that such research tells.

In this particular project, reading the moderator's own comments reveals an anxiety about genre. However much a focus group moderator may wish to portray her- or himself as, variously, Indiana Jones or Phileas Fogg, private eye, sniper, or spy (all metaphors used by the moderator in our project), more banally we should admit that first and foremost the moderator is an author, who labours in the shadow of the report that she or he will eventually have to write for a client. In suggesting these comparisons, the moderator shows himself to be dreaming up fictional roles. He indicates that the archetype for qualitative market research is literary, if not para-literary, pulp fiction; the only difficulty is deciding which particular popular culture genre is the most appropriate to write up the tales of focus group derring-do. Should researchers present their results in the style of Rider Haggard, Jules Verne, Raymond Chandler, W. E. Johns, or John Le Carré?

Genre invokes the process of literary production. The generic distinction between poetry and prose, for instance, is in part a question of formal conventions (the use of rhythm, metre, rhyme, and so on). These are elements in the process of a text's production: a writer setting out to produce a sonnet chooses to obey one specific set of such conventions.

A focus group-driven market research report is the end product of a peculiarly complex set of processes, and is therefore a particularly hybrid genre. It is part prose, part performance; part scripted, part improvisation. Though there is a final author, there is also (as was observed in this specific project) a "cast of thousands." What kind of stories is market research telling, and what kind of stories *should* it be telling? How does the process of production specific to qualitative, focus-group research influence the genre of the finished text?

The moderator her- or himself may prove to be one of the least reliable readers of the text that she or he produces, and one of the least reliable narrators of the research results. But just as there's nothing wrong with fiction as a mode of market research, so there's nothing wrong with an unreliable narrator--much literary fiction gains its force from unreliable narration. *We should not blame the moderator for her or his "faults."* Unreliability, contradiction, and hesitation are a necessary part of the genre. Rather than better moderators, we should perhaps look to employ "worse" moderators, i.e. moderators who are aware of their limits--and who are prepared, as in this project, to invite collaborators. The kind of moderator we *don't* want is the

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“have a go hero” who believes he can do it all her- or (no doubt more usually) himself. Literary analysis can clarify the mis-steps that are *inevitably a feature* of qualitative research (as with any other textual production), so enabling a more productive reading of the stories that our unreliable narrators tell.

Reading the focus group transcripts, and seeing how the fiction is put together, we see the conventions and (ir)rationality of qualitative research are taken for granted; they remain beyond investigation. There is no better justification for involving others (semioticians, ethnographers, literary critics) in market research than the realization that the author has absorbed so many of its conventions that she or he cannot see how much she or he is also an actor caught up in the script. Precisely because the moderator *thinks* that she or he knows what is going on, and operates according to the set conventions of the genre, she or he discards the knowledges brought to bear by other, more naïve and apparently less-informed, participants. Put another way: the problem with focus groups is that they are so *focussed* that the glare of the light they cast on the subject matter of the final report leaves the mechanisms that enable that report in the shade. The moderator’s reading of the focus group is “second nature,” in denial of its essential artificiality. Like the audience member who clammers onto the stage to protest Macbeth’s murder of Duncan, forgetting he is watching a play, the moderator forgets that the group is a performance staged for her or his benefit.

Let us embark a brief close reading of the focus group transcripts from this project, concentrating on a passage that a moderator would normally (and this moderator does) wish to pass over in silence, but that catches the eye of literary analysis because of the way in which it reveals how this genre is constructed.

For the text is full of silences. Beyond any other minor errors of transcription, the transcripts (*inevitably*) fail as representations of the workings of the groups. The transcription is an element in the overall fictionalisation: it purports to be faithful, but is already selective. In our case, for instance, only one of the four contains the preamble offered by the moderator to the subjects, in which the (apparent) conventions of the evening’s performance were explained. The moderator saw it as a “commonplace” delivered at the start of every group, which could be cut out to save costs. *But excising the commonplace means that the genre’s defining conventions are omitted.*

The explanation of conventions, deemed unimportant for the transcriber, is of course of crucial interest for the subjects themselves. By omitting this opening monologue, the transcripts ignore the moves that start to outline the roles that the various characters are to play. There is more to these “ground rules” than meets the eye, though the moderator seems to hope that this is not acknowledged, as close reading of the one preamble that survives can show:

Hello, my name’s John. There’s a cast of thousands here. [. . .] I will reveal all in a second. [. . .] You’ve probably heard about it, focus groups and all that kind of stuff. I’ll tell you some ground rules. You can smoke, go ahead please. When you have these focus groups it is just like a conversation, some market research is clipboards and saying yes and no and stuff. That is quite unsatisfying but this is just having a conversation so I can hear your own story about why you do stuff, what you find interesting and stuff like that. The best way of putting it is the way people see it themselves. I am doing it on behalf of a client that I’ll tell you about later and if I show you things and you

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don't like them, you think they're boring, if it doesn't make any sense to you, that's okay, the last group were a bit like that, couldn't make head or tail of things I showed them but it is absolutely not a problem, it is no skin off my nose. [. . .] Anybody got any questions apart from what the hell am I doing here? Okay, let's go round quickly and get names. I'm John.

Let us note (as the moderator repeatedly iterated in the production of the paper) that this introduction, the only one recorded on any transcript, may well be atypical, anomalous, and the product of unique circumstances. But from the point of view of the literary critic (especially the deconstructive critic), precisely its apparent atypicality is what draws our attention. This introduction stands out because as a *symptom* that reveals something of the *unconscious* and unstated (elsewhere omitted, taken for granted) forces that structure not merely this group, but, this critic is prepared to wager, *all focus-group driven qualitative research*. For the literary critic, it is where a text "breaks down," where it is most out of line, that we see the truth of what elsewhere appears untroubled and natural.

Here the transcripts' blindness is also built into the monologue itself (which is why a naturally suspicious literary critic will doubt that transcription omission is as innocent as the moderator claims): the moderator introduces himself twice ("Hello, my name's John. [. . .] I'm John") as though *to bracket off the niceties that come between--all that "stuff"* (a word repeated four times) that remains both specified and yet still strangely indistinct. No wonder that even this explanation, the moderator should undermine the speech's entire explanatory purpose by suggesting that the subjects will still be wondering, "what the hell [they] are doing here." That question will haunt the next hour and a half.

The group is described as "just like a conversation." But it is already clear that this is a rather peculiar kind of conversation. The topic is chosen in advance, but is not revealed immediately to those who are to converse. Indeed, in guise of an explanation ("I will reveal all") it sets up a mystery: "I am doing this on behalf of a client that I'll tell you about later." A question is raised (who is the client?) that will not be answered for almost an hour--and will not be fully answered even then. (The mystery will persist for readers of this paper--we are holding the answer back.) The moderator purports to be "just having a conversation" as though the client didn't matter, were almost perfectly incidental--"no skin off my nose." But the subjects are quite aware that the client (and the client's money) provides the *raison d'être* for the whole exercise, and moreover that this will not be a conversation on equal terms: one party to the performance knows something denied to the other participants. This is not "just like" a conversation; there is an unseen, undisclosed client, and the subjects are aware, and naturally curious, as to what this client wants of *them*. This mystery preoccupies them, and the repressed returns when the subjects later try to guess who the client may be: "Is it the police or someone like that?"

The subjects remain acutely aware of the artificiality of the situation, for all the moderator's attempts to bracket off the mechanisms that structure the encounter. They are aware that the group is a commercial exchange, pointing out "Your time's running out, you're going to have to pay us another £30." Here, they try to turn the situation to their advantage, in recognition that they have some knowledge that the moderator is trying to tap--it's not "no skin off [his] nose," he is being paid, and paying them, for a purpose, although the nature of that purpose remains veiled.

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The subjects recognize that there is some burden of expectation upon them. They seek the emotional rewards and satisfaction of performing well, of having the moderator say in conclusion “thanks ever so much, you bailed me out, you were brilliant.” Throughout, then, they are responding to the mystery outlined but simultaneously denied by the moderator’s occluded introduction: they are trying to perform, but they are also seeking to discover, interpret, and understand the generic conventions that the moderator proposes to ignore.

In short, the moderator sets up a hierarchical framework, in which he possesses a knowledge that the subjects do not, although he moves swiftly on soon after the sowing the seeds of that mystery; on the other hand, the subjects are aware that they must have some knowledge (their opinions) that is worth time and money to the moderator, however much the nature of even their own knowledge is initially a puzzle. The moderator presents the exchange as equal and natural--and the subjects go along with this fiction for the most part, but not without occasionally reminding the moderator of the artificiality of the situation, and of the fact that it is the moderator who sets the rules (while the moderator starts to pack up his equipment, they ask “What client is it? *Are we allowed to know?*”).

Both parties (moderator and subjects) are performing a role, and self-consciously so. They both reveal--the moderator in his introductory remarks, the subjects in their impertinent questions--their double consciousness. For the group to take place they must recruit or be recruited as part of a market research initiative funded by a client; for the group to function and be productive, they must act as though there were no such external conditions.

The moderator, therefore, does his best to put the subjects at their ease and to perform conversational equality to the best of his ability. No doubt the need--perhaps even the desire--to be viewed as something of an equal is more pronounced in the case of this particular project, where the interviewees are young men talking about social drinking. However, the moderator’s “neutrality” is compromised as he establishes what in a psychoanalytic context would be understood as “transference”: an affective relation between subject and analyst designed to establish trust and the possibility that the subject will reveal some aspect of his or her own desires.

And, again, no wonder. *The transference relation that causes the moderator to (purport to) ignore even his own rules is built into the exchange from the start, and necessarily so.* If the dream economy is a an economy governed and mediated through competing fictions, those fictions are in turn generated by the desires of that economy’s participants. Any market research must, to replicate some of the economic context, also stage the resuscitation of those desires. In this instance, the moderator had also to perform a role that approximated to that of the drinking buddy. Some of this, too, is bracketed off. In one focus group, for instance, the moderator started the introductions by recounting, albeit very briefly, his own most recent experience of excessive drinking; this, however, was also edited out of the transcript. Elsewhere, he adopted the argot of his subjects: in their imprecision (the all-purpose word “stuff” in the passage above); in referring to drunkenness as getting “bladdered” or “arse-holed”; or other swearing. Throughout, he repeatedly confirmed and affirmed the subjects’ opinions: “yeah,” “OK,” “right.” Most of all, however, he had to ignore the very conventions that establish the genre.

Though, as our semiotic analysis points out, the scene often seemed to be pedagogic, unlike in an average classroom, after the initial preamble the moderator

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endlessly denied that he had any privileged knowledge to impart (“thanks for bailing me out,” “I know it’s crazy stuff,” “I’m just making this up, I don’t know”). Health anxieties were dismissed as “all the boring adult reasons” (heavy drinking being “bad for the liver, long term memory loss”), though these are precisely the motivations that prompt concern at so-called “binge-drinking,” and as such the motivations for the entire project itself. Eager to dissociate himself from the tedious world of adulthood, the moderator attempted to dissuade the subjects from adopting an “adult” tone, either, stopping one subject in his tracks, getting him “off his soapbox,” when he took up a position of moral disapproval of binge-drinking (the only time that any subject voluntarily chose to use the phrase “binge drink”). The moderator performed *matey adolescence to ensure that the subjects themselves would perform this role, too*, and writing himself into the same fiction in the process.

One more time: *it is necessarily so. If the moderator were not part of the fiction (and so were not fallible), any encounter with the subjects would be unimaginable, because imagination itself would have been excluded.*

In conclusion, and back to the question of genre: the text that qualitative research produces is the result of a peculiarly hybrid genre, a performance part-scripted and part-improvised, in which moderator and subjects alike both suspend and maintain their disbelief in order to generate a space in which competing narratives about (in this case) drinking could be acted out. The resources available to participants when faced with narratives that they felt unable to believe or unwilling to accept include a refusal to abide with the form’s generic conventions. This happened in one of the focus groups in this study, when the subjects were so unconvinced (their desires so untempted) by the narrative of embourgeoisement and maturation provided by the moderator that they effectively stopped performing. (Their final comment to the moderator’s plea for “any suggestions you might have”: “Yeah, make beer cheaper.”) Because the moderator was already invested in the performance, and in the game of *mateyness*, he was unable to extricate himself or to rethink the stories that he was telling. This is again where an external analyst, who steps aside from the performance and the fiction that is being written, can lend her or his literary expertise to read all the more effectively the pulp fiction of qualitative market research.

## Why the Moderator can no longer act alone

### Or What the moderator/ straight man/ fall guy did next

#### The unreliability of research respondents

Binge drinking is an extreme case, but it illustrates a fundamental issue in group research – how reliable are research respondents? We cannot always gauge the extent of either under reporting or exaggeration. With a topic such as binge drinking it is impossible: respondents were as likely to exaggerate their drinking behaviour or to under report it, depending on context. So there needed to be a component of the research that depended on observation. The benefit of commissioning the binge films independently was that the moderator could use the films as stimulus material with the understanding that respondents’ own drinking patterns would be different in character and intensity – but that the portrayal of an evening’s drinking supplemented by the commentary provided simultaneously an internal and external perspective to kick-start the groups.

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But there is a wider question– if we know the veracity of respondents to be flawed, then what value does the research have? The positivist research model crumbles at the point where the allowance made for under and over reporting can no longer be sustained. But within a framework where interpretation is not dependent on a quasi-objective account of what happened and what respondents really meant, the research is still valid because it invokes a recognisable discourse with its own structure and rules. At this point, however, we move beyond conventional qualitative interpretation, and need supplementary forms of analysis. Treating the research content as a species of fiction may lead to more useful interpretation, particularly where we are trying to change behaviours.

## The maturing of the discussion group as a cultural form

As more and more of the population have attended discussion groups, it has become more difficult to sustain their rather peculiar framework. The idea that respondents should ideally not have attended a group discussion before ignores the fact that for a group format to work, there has to be a basic comprehension of how it is supposed to function – and that some social groups will be more comfortable with the format than others. What the binge films showed was that subjects were comfortable with the idea of being filmed – reality TV style. This raises the question that perhaps research formats should be chosen in line with the expectations and experience of the respondents, instead of using a format with the presumption that respondents are new to it (and yet familiar with its conventions).

## The moderator as facilitator

The neutrality of the moderator is a fiction that becomes harder to sustain the more we examine it. Conventionally, at the start of the group the moderator defines himself in relation to the client – as impartial and independent. But it became very evident during the groups that the moderator (Coke in hand) needed to define his relation to the respondents to alcohol - what was his own drinking behaviour? Respondents discussed their hostility towards those who didn't keep up with the binge – the basis for sharing stories about the excesses of drunkenness was that these experiences are already shared, or at least that the moderator in his youth had engaged in similar behaviour so knew exactly what the respondent was talking about! In certain of the groups the moderator adopted a particular role as a parent, and this improved the group dynamics because in effect he had taken a position familiar to respondents, whereas the role as pedagogue/neutral observer left respondents hunting for a pigeon hole in which to put him! Perhaps it is time we freed moderators to be less 'reliable' and to adopt different roles.

And what is the appropriate focal distance between moderator and the subculture where he is interviewing? Is a shared language a sufficient condition? Alternatively, how far outside of the culture do moderators have to get before they are effectively unable to interpret the data? The ethnographic component was conducted by, among others, an Iranian and a Brazilian. They brought a novel perspective precisely because they didn't belong to the host culture. Interestingly, the ethnographic subjects went to particular trouble to explain themselves. For instance where one of the Kingston drinkers checked that the Brazilian filmmaker understood the word *bravado*! When moderators work across cultures, respondents can't make assumptions about education and class. Would it be appropriate for certain projects to use non-native moderators with the specific intention of making it more difficult for indigenous respondents to decode their social and cultural background? International research negotiates these issues as a commonplace.

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Are there limits to a moderator's claim to authority based on authenticity ("because I was there when the group happened"). How valid is this? What does the moderator miss *because* they are there and part of the process? Working with a team of analysts who were not present in the groups provided another level of analysis that would not conventionally be available to a moderator.

As for the accountability of the moderator: how often is the moderator's work checked and challenged? Unaccountability makes for easy debriefs and a fast turnaround but raises issues as to the quality of the work when it is the moderator's responsibility to judge whether they have got the balance right and whether they have missed anything fundamental.

## The moderator as interpreter

The moderator as interpreter's most critical role is as the one who was there, who asked the questions, who interprets the response, the tone of voice, the hesitations and the body language of respondents that they are best placed to deliver an authentic account of the findings. But there is a temptation is to treat their account as the 'authorised' version – because there is usually only one account given.

The addition of the binge films created different takes and mixes - too many to be so easily reduced and resolved. Which was the most authentic – the subjects seen in the binge film, the subject co-discovering the binge the morning after with hangover in place, the research respondents watching somebody else's binge, or even as happened in the last group the subject now a research respondent watching his own binge and co-discovery as filmic narrative? All these levels lead to a process rather like the onion skin technique used in animation in which layers of tracing paper are used to sequence images on top of one another and to create gestures. The vector through a range of possibilities brings to life material that could otherwise quickly become stale. There *is* no definitive version of the binge, rather a range of ways of viewing the event, and a series of narratives that it generated. The conventional sample grid forces comparisons between different age and demographic groups to obtain a 'fix' on the issue in question. What may be more useful is to generate an onion-skin of possibilities.

## The moderator as editor in chief

The interplay between the moderator and the groups is part of the content, not just a process element. Moderators take responsibility for defining which parts of the research data are content, and so useful, and which are down to process so should be discarded. But there is a basic flaw in allowing moderators to be their own editors. Ultimately their own contribution needs to be scrutinised; it is not possible for them to fulfil this role credibly.

## The role of the client

This project, more than most, raised the spectre of the client's motivation. Qualitative research doesn't concern itself with what the client intends to do with the findings. But with a topic such as binge drinking, the client company's motivation became critical. It was clear from the response within some of the groups that the idea that a drinks company might actively try to stop binge drinking was downright unintelligible. Conspiracy theory wasn't far behind: "they're researching it to show they're doing something about it". Conventional group research would treat this as a process issue – it is the moderator's responsibility to convince the group that the client is indeed serious. But that is to reveal how many assumptions are built into qualitative

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research at ground level. Normally we don't have to persuade respondents that the client wants to sell them something or that the client believes that their response will be useful in developing a communications message. And ethics, conventionally a kind of guard rail around best practice is revealed to be fundamental to the whole enterprise which research is supposed to embody.

### A new approach for group research

So to summarise. The 'guest producer' analysts raised a number of fundamental issues about the role of the moderator, issues that are conventionally ignored or muted in qualitative projects and analysis. We propose an alternative framework, addressing these issues and decentering the moderator to generate more useful findings and overcome some of the artificialities which have grown up as part of the research process.

Firstly the moderator would continue to be "the live musician/performer" but supported by a guest producer whose role and remit would be different from the second opinion of another qualitative researcher. This producer would be trained in one of the supplementary disciplines, capable of informing the project by virtue of that discipline. However their particular mandate would be to review the fieldwork, the way the moderator runs it, to co-operate in the analysis and interpretation in a way that would ensure that the project generated multiple layers of interpretation, including one which included the role of the moderator as catalyst and inquisitor. The producer would be an arbiter on what constituted process and content, though the producer would be himself minded by the moderator. Their research results would come out of their mutual collaboration and competition--their remix.

The primary benefit of this approach would that it would free the moderator from the untenable position of being sole judge, prosecutor, defence counsel and jury. The moderator would be free to adopt a new role within the analysis process: moving from controlling auteur to (possibly unreliable) narrator. It would be possible to acknowledge biases and local effects between moderator and groups – the moderator's narrative one of many in the group discussion.

Why would this be better? Because it would allow the research to explore tensions within the group, including potential conflicts and divergences between moderator and the group, but without fear of compromising their position as the guardian of so called objectivity. It would prevent the moderator exacerbating inherent problems in the group discussion format by pretending that they are not there. The roles played by the moderator would be made explicit and subject to critique by the producer (and therefore also self-analysis by the moderator) to they extent that they assisted in the development of the discourse.

We need to factor in ways of making the client agenda intelligible and credible. This is not just a process issue – though it might entail a formal interview of the client and gathering of research data client-side that can be presented as evidence to respondents – so that research takes on more of the structure of a public consultation.

Another consequence of relocating the analysis in a partnership between moderators and a producer is that the producer can operate from anywhere. We have already commented that much of the ethnography was in effect cross-cultural. Within hours of the completion of fieldwork the audio was uploaded to a website from which the entire team could listen to it or download it. The transcribers, one working from

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Twickenham, another from Bombay, downloaded the audio and emailed back the transcripts within days. In principle there is no reason why the other participants in the remix might not be located anywhere, allowing for radical new forms of collaboration and interrogation of video, audio and textual data. The days are numbered where the moderator works unchallenged within their so-called own culture.

This partnership ought not to add hugely to research costs. Much as we would like to keep the dream team together – the use of just one producer working in a complementary way to the moderator would add perhaps 25% to the cost but be nothing like as expensive as a full multidisciplinary study.

### Research appropriate to the dream economy

If understanding the Dream Economy were defined as the discovery of how to create added value through channelling consumers' unconscious desires, then we would argue that the positivism inherent in much current qualitative research practice actively militates against this. We desperately need parallel interpretations that open up multiple possible narratives. Narratives are the stories we tell ourselves, the stories by which we interpret reality, the scripts we attempt to live out. These need to be accessible to our research - the narratives that respondents admit to have followed to date are only some of the possibilities.

In the binge-drinking project what we have been able to sketch out are alternative and perhaps more productive narratives that respondents might plausibly choose to adopt. Understanding the openness of narrative form helps us see ways that respondents and consumers can be inspired to dream new dreams. Positivism is no help here with its blinkered concentration on the past. . Just because it isn't true doesn't mean that it isn't plausible or useful. The challenge is to find and assemble new narratives, which people may choose to live out, informed by and developed from an understanding of the multitude of constructions/stories/narratives that individuals use to explain and understand why they binge drink.

We are therefore arguing for a new approach to a re-mixed qualitative research. The re-mix, whether complimentary or confrontational with the original qualitative material, provides fresh new perspectives for research. The moderator is no longer central to the process, but is instead part of a fluid collaborative process that re-mixes research findings from a variety of sources. The output of this form of collaborative work can create new hybrid research findings, which offer fresh and imaginative perspectives on the world.

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## A footnote on the ethical conduct of the project

All the respondents were 18 years or over so were of legal drinking age.

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The ethnography subjects were recruited to be accompanied and filmed on a night out. They did **not** know that drinking or that binge drinking was the theme of the study. The film makers did not incite them to drink.

Payment of an incentive for participating was made after the night out so could not have contributed to it. There was therefore no guarantee with either of the films that a 'binge' would going to take place.

When a subject from one of the ethnographic films emerged within the fourth group he was asked if he was willing to have the film shown as part of the group in which he was about to participate as part of a friendship group. He agreed. Had he refused permission, we would have used the other film.