



Reception studies - criticisms

Reception studies as a corrective to textual semiotics

The New Audience Research is fashionable, certainly. Whether it is all that new is debatable, despite its practitioners' claims. Curran, for example, dismissively referring to new audience research as the 'new revisionism' shows how many, much earlier, studies have demonstrated that audiences construct highly individual readings of media texts (Curran (1990)). There is, however, certainly some justice in David Morley's claim (1997) that neither Curran nor anyone else could have written that particular history of cultural studies until the 'new revisionism' had transformed our understanding of audience research. Still, as just one example at random, Maletzke in 1963 was sharply critical of the elitist thinking behind the whole concept of 'mass society', pointing out that industrial society of his day allowed a greater degree of individual variation in tastes, opinions and values than at any previous time. He concludes that the whole idea of mass culture is rather a product of the isolation of intellectuals than of observation of society (1963 : 26 - 27).

Whether the new audience research is entirely new or not is probably not of any great importance. Certainly, the emphasis placed on the 'pleasures of resistance', 'tactics of resistance' etc., largely derived from de Certeau is a new emphasis. Focusing, via ethnographic studies, on the audiences' development of counterhegemonic readings is also a refreshing change from some of the tendencies of the 'hegemony' school to focus almost exclusively on the text. The acceptance that consumers may exercise a measure of choice and show some discrimination rather than do stupidly as they are told by the media is a refreshing change from the pessimism of much of the 'mass society' approach. After all, you're not likely to be overly concerned about developing any genuine resistance amongst people you consider too stupid to question what they see and hear in the media. The New Audience Research goes a long way to answering the criticism by Anderson and Sharrock that media studies neglects audiences (Anderson and Sharrock (1979)). Certainly, the attempt from semiotics to develop a science of the text from which one could read off the positioning force, and hence the ideological effect, of a media text on its readers was likely to be flawed because of the lack of attention paid to the readers' purposes in using the text and the social context in which it was used. No doubt the approach developed by Morley, de Certeau, Fiske and others is a valuable corrective.

Loss of political impetus?

What troubles me, however, in much of this recent focus on audiences' construction of meanings is what Douglas Kellner refers to as 'the fetishism of resistance':

There is a tendency in cultural studies to celebrate resistance *per se* without distinguishing between types and forms of resistance (a similar problem resides with indiscriminate celebration of audience pleasure in certain reception studies).

Kellner (1995)

In celebrating audiences' semiotic guerrilla tactics, the 'tactics of the weak', scholars often seem to overlook the 'strategies of the powerful' which de Certeau also drew attention to. It is hard to avoid

the suspicion that sometimes the headily romantic connotations of the terminology of 'guerrilla', 'resistance', 'poaching', 'opposition' go to the researchers' heads. If we accept the analogy of guerrilla warfare, then doesn't it matter who wins? Che might look good on the study wall, with his flowing locks and the red star eternally on his guerrillero's beret, but, if he spent much of his struggle suffering from asthma and lost in the jungle, then he didn't actually contribute much to the emancipation of Bolivian peasants. The 'resistant consumer' could well develop into just another gloriously principled icon of the eternally defeated 'left' - 'left' in inverted commas, since the academic left on the university campuses has no need to engage with the political realities which confront the rest of us. The very term 'realities' has a quaintly unfashionable ring to it when academic cultural studies seeks to reduce cultural phenomena to mere encounters with texts. We are not all the sovereign consumers celebrated by both neo-liberalism and much new audience research. Some are more sovereign than others, and amongst these more sovereign, I suspect, are the tenured academics. As a practising teacher, I'm aware that my students can engage in their guerrilla warfare, to the extent even of hacking and crashing the network, but I'm also aware that they and I ultimately operate within the constraints of the syllabuses laid down for them and that those syllabuses come from somewhere, are developed by certain people in certain organizations, operating on certain assumptions about the purpose and goals of education and training and situated within certain organizational constraints. I am aware that a syllabus which might require, for example, some study of 'citizenship' or similar would be qualitatively different from one which requires mere demonstration of technical skill in handling IT applications. For academics to assume that we can understand, say, soap operas as cultural practices whilst disregarding the institutional practices which create them, circulate them and establish audiences for them seems simply silly. Resistance? They really should get out more. And, as regards getting out more, I would say that it strikes me as odd that relatively little attention is paid to the tremendous flowering of creativity in the contemporary music scene. There are studies of rock and pop, certainly, all too frequently from the perspective of committed fans, but not much attention seems to be paid to the kids with their new PCs or ancient Ataris, the DJs in the local club producing music of startling originality, a vibrant example of the *bricolage* the academics fetishize, an example in many cases of 'resistance' as it serves as a way of avoiding the simple choice between a McJob and the dole. Technomeister [Aphex Twin](#) (see also [Rephlex Records](#)) and Squarepusher incorporate into their music influences from the 'art music' of [Stockhausen](#), [Riley](#), [Cage](#), [Xenakis](#), breaking down the wall between bourgeois high culture and popular culture, but little attention seems to be paid to them by the academy. (For comment on drum'n'bass see McRobbie (1999); for comment on a vast range of contemporary music, see David Toop's excellent *Ocean of Sound*, which simply exudes enthusiasm and love of popular music; to find out what's going on, check out [absorb](#))

Amongst those researchers who are generally grouped under the heading of 'new audience research', Morley is one of the most circumspect about the concentration on the micro-processes of reception to the detriment of any engagement with the macro-structures of the media and society. As he expresses it,

The power of viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of centralized media institutions to construct the texts which the viewer then interprets; to imagine otherwise is simply foolish.

Morley (1992)

Fiske is also a good deal more cautious than he is often given credit for. Whilst he celebrates

audiences' semiotic guerrilla raids on the dominant culture, the newly discovered 'semiotic democracy', he also recognizes that

The economic needs of the cultural industries are thus perfectly in line with the disciplinary and ideological requirements of the existing social order, and all cultural commodities must therefore, to a greater or lesser extent, bear the forces that we can call centralizing, disciplinary, hegemony, massifying, commodifying...

Fiske (1989) p.28

The Frankfurt School and the British movement in cultural studies, primarily the CCCS, were involved in a political project. That project involved the identification of the methods used by the media and the rest of the 'culture industry' to construct consensus, the ideological dominance of a particular structure of society (Nazism and later liberal capitalism in the case of the Frankfurt School; neoliberal capitalism, specifically Thatcherism and Reaganism in the case of the CCCS).

That political project, it seems to me, may be in danger of being abandoned in the New Audience Research. It is interesting and important to see how audience members produce resistive meanings, rejecting the preferred readings, but there is not necessarily anything to celebrate in that. The currently fashionable focus on consumption and interpretation greatly exaggerates the freedoms of daily life, as Garnham reminds us:

Does anyone who has produced a text or a symbolic form believe that interpretation is entirely random or that pleasure cannot be used to manipulative ends? If the process of interpretation were entirely random, and, therefore, we had to give up entirely the notion of intentionality in communication, the human species would have dropped the activity long ago.

Garnham (1997: 60-61)

It is interesting and important to investigate the micro-processes of reception, but that reception takes place within the macro-structures of media and society and it is unacceptable that the concern with the minutiae of reception analysis should displace concern with the power relationships that pertain at the macro level. That, as Brown puts it, hegemony is leaky and counterhegemonic readings are developed in the interstices of the dominant ideology may be interesting in itself, but so what? What kind of political resistance is this? It is surely only in a state in which democratic politics is utterly bankrupt that popular culture can be fetishized as political resistance. I am sometimes reminded of Dennett's tale of the sea-squirt which drifts around until it finds a suitable rock to attach itself to, whereupon, not needing its brain any more, it eats it. 'It's rather like getting tenure,' Dennett dryly comments. (1991 : 177). McRobbie observes of the focus within cultural studies on the creation of new cultural identities through attachment to goods and the 'social life of things' has sometimes led theorists to 'leave class behind' (not to mention their brains). Commenting on works which have investigated women's role as consumers, McRobbie observes that:

Since women's place in contemporary society has undergone such rapid changes it is also necessary to take these changes into account. If, for example, 25 per cent of the labour force in Britain now works part-time, and if 65 per cent of these workers are female, and if 42 per cent of births are to unmarried women and 1 in 3 (soon to be 1 in 2) marriages fail, if 20 per cent of households are currently headed by an unsupported single mother, and finally if 60 per cent of part-time workers need to rely on income support to bring their weekly income up to a so-called living wage (all figures from *Social Trends*, March 1996), then to talk in uncomplicated terms about women comprising the bulk of consumers without considering the consequences these factors have for participation in consumption, is neither politically nor intellectually viable. These figures [...] suggest that most women in contemporary Britain are struggling and making sacrifices to make ends meet.

To celebrate daily life as intrinsically disruptive and playful and therefore subversive and resistant is simply inadequate. As Kellner points out:

Difference sells. Capitalism must constantly multiply markets, styles, fads, and artefacts to keep absorbing consumers into its practices and lifestyles. The mere valorisation of 'difference' as a mark of opposition can simply help market new styles and artefacts if the difference in question and its effects are not adequately appraised. It can also promote a form of identity politics in which each group affirms its own specificity and limits politics to the group's own interests, thus overlooking common forces of oppression. Such difference or identity politics aids 'divide and conquer' strategies which ultimately serve the interest of the powers that be.

Kellner (1995) p. 40

The need for greater diversity - the rallying cry of my university years - is now not only accepted by the culture industries, it is the mantra of global capital. and identity politics, as they were practiced in the nineties, weren't a threat, they were a goldmine. 'This revolution,' writes cultural critic Richard Goldstein in *The VillageVoice*, 'turned out to be the savior of late capitalism. And just in time, too.

Klein (2000) p. 115

Ien Ang makes a similar point in discussing the early use of video recorders, which originally became popular amongst those whose tastes were outside the mainstream and were therefore poorly served by centralist television, for example immigrants or fans of hard-core porn. The choice of the new and developing technology as a vehicle for one's specialist pleasures might be celebrated as 'resistance', but Ang suggests that it's actually nothing more than 'choice'. If the para-military terminology of 'semiotic guerrilla' etc. is used, then, Ang suggests, it might be more accurate to say that such audience groups retreated rather than resisted. The media, of course, respond to this retreat by increasing 'choice':

Seen this way, the figure of the 'active audience' has nothing to do with 'resistance', but everything to do with incorporation: the imperative of choice interpellates the audience as 'active!' Choice is now one of the prime discursive mechanisms through which people are drawn into the seductions of consumption, but at the same time, because 'choice' is by definition an open-ended, procedural mechanism - it can be manipulated, but not imposed - there can be no guarantee that people will make the 'right' choices, that is the ones that sustain the reproduction of the 'system'. Uncertainty is thus inherently built into the 'system' of postmodern capitalism.

(Ang (1996): 12)

In a global economy where the major players employ the services of 'cool-hunters' like Youth Intelligence and Sputnik to seek out the latest cool, cutting-edge trends in the playgrounds of black kids' schools, where they then feed these fashions back to the kids, kitting out the opinion leaders amongst them with the latest cool products aimed at that target market and produced in South-East Asian sweatshops, where's the 'resistance'? The anarchic, chaotic, rapid-fire imagery of much of MTV's output may appear superficially 'resistant', 'subversive', 'different', but it is watched by 85% of those consulted in the New World Teen Survey, constituting 'an all-news bulleting for creating brand images'. (*Wall Street Journal* in Klein (2000 : 120))

In Kellner's words, 'difference sells'. Similarly, Murdock criticizes the 'proponents of the new ethnography' for 'tend[ing] to skate round questions of power' (1989 in Morley (1992)) and for

presenting research results which 'can easily collude with conservative celebrations of untrammelled consumer choice' (Golding and Murdock 1991). The focus exclusively on audience pleasures, disregarding the overarching framework of capitalist production and New Right politics within which these pleasures are situated, turns cultural studies away from any practical involvement in the political and economic structures of society and towards the treatment of audiences exclusively as audiences, rather than as

citizens functioning as citizens, the dominant current in cultural studies stamps its seal of approval upon what is already a powerful tendency within industrial societies: the diffusion of popular culture as a surrogate for politics. It confirms the futility of trying to - indeed, needing to - organize for public control of mass media.

Gitlin (1997 : 37)

Morley himself makes a plea for research which will investigate television viewing as

simultaneously a ritual, whose function is to structure domestic life and provide a symbolic mode of participation in the national community *and* an active mode of consumption and production *and* as a process operating within the realm of ideology.

Morley (1992)

Kellner (1995) seeks a renewal of **critical theory** in a 'multi-perspectival' approach to media research which would incorporate the perspectives of gender, race and class and combine 'Marxist, feminist, structuralist, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic and other critical perspectives' and Grossberg emphasizes that

Cultural studies needs a theory of how cultural empowerment and disempowerment are articulated to larger structures of social power, and of how, sometimes, people can be defeated and oppressed by articulations of the very practices that empower them. It needs to understand the struggles being waged by competing political agencies and institutions, at different sites, and the stakes of these struggles in relation to popular culture and daily life.

Grossberg (1992 : 96)

Thompson (1990) provides us with a searching criticism of the shortcomings of the various **critical** approaches to media influence, pointing repeatedly to the *fallacy of internalism* common in such approaches, by which he refers to the assumption that effects on audiences can simply be read off the texts which the media commentator analyses. He makes a case for 'depth **hermeneutics**' in which a variety of different approaches would be drawn together. Thompson reminds us that when we are involved in social enquiry it is not possible simply to engage in interpretation as the natural scientist interprets his or her data since the object of our interpretations is already pre-interpreted by subjects who, in going through the routines of their everyday lives, are permanently involved in a process of interpretation and re-interpretation of the events and utterances which they encounter and engage in, interpretations and re-interpretations which themselves may be conditioned by pre-interpretations. Nevertheless, Thompson considers it important not to lose sight of the relations of domination involved in the deployment of symbolic forms. The fact remains that, whilst, certainly, symbolic forms are interpreted and understood by those who receive them, often in entirely unforeseen ways, they 'are *also* meaningful constructs which are structured in definite ways and ... are embedded in specific social and historical conditions' (280). According to Thompson, many recent theorists have become so preoccupied with diversity and difference that they lose sight of the systematically asymmetrical structuring of social relations, i.e. of relations of power and domination.

Reception studies and meaning

What is, I think, particularly promising in the New Audience Research is that it addresses the question of where the generation of meaning takes place. There is an assumption underlying much of what is often referred to as the transmission model of communication, e.g. Lasswell or Shannon-Weaver (largely American-dominated, and largely liberal-pluralist in its political orientation) that the 'transmission' of meanings from 'Sender' to 'Receiver' is a relatively unproblematic process. Somehow the Sender puts meanings into symbols which s/he then transmits to the Receiver, who somehow takes the meanings out again.

The approach from semiotics is quite different. The semiological approach is to see meaning as a social construction. If you follow that approach through to its logical conclusion, then you have to ask to what extent it is possible to make the claim that meanings are somehow 'in' the signs we use at all. It could be that it is not sensible to look for meaning within media 'texts' at all, but rather to look at how meanings are constructed at the point of encounter between texts and readers. It is this which is addressed in the new audience research.

Nevertheless, although media texts are certainly polysemic, multi-accentual, meanings are constrained, they are not totally indeterminate. If you read 'bicycle' as 'banana', you are wrong; if you take a NO ENTRY sign to mean 'please drive your car down this street', then the meaning you have for the sign is the wrong meaning and neither of these is cause for celebration of the generation of resistive meanings in a haze of revolutionary romanticism and what is disturbing is that 'semiotic resistance' seems to have become the new orthodoxy in audience research. Some years ago, Meghan Morris wondered if there weren't perhaps some kind of publishers' master disk being used to produce thousands of versions of the same article about pleasure and resistance with just a few minor variations.

The 'new audience research' is, as I have said above, a useful corrective to the tendency of some semiotic analysis to assume that meanings inhere within the text, a useful corrective also to the tendency of some students of the political economy of the media to assume that ownership of media organs equates to ideological power, but some reception analysis simply passes from enumeration of audience responses to an uncritical celebration of the banal conclusion that we don't all understand things the same way. That is inadequate - why do we understand things differently; what are the social and psychological causes of such differences; what are the social consequences? Those are questions which need to be investigated. However, whilst criticizing some of the new audience research for the facile assumption that deviant readings are necessarily resistant, I do not wish to claim that culture and its uses cannot be resistant. Why else would the authorities try to ban 'offensive' music, why else would they seek to control the internet? What I am saying is that it is inappropriate to assume that a deviant reading is necessarily oppositional or resistant and that we need more research to determine how some readings are resistive and others are not. In the final analysis, though, I do not believe that such research should be conducted in a political vacuum. The advance of the New Right is real, Thompson's 'systematic asymmetries' of domination are real. The celebration of people's power to interpret as if it were necessarily some kind of political resistance distracts us from the central issue of how the interpretations made in people's everyday lives are implicated in the triumph of global capitalism. The prisoners of Stalin's gulags tattooed anti-Stalin slogans into the skin of their

faces. The tattoos were cut out and the skin stitched up, again and again, to the extent, Solzhenitzyn tells us, that one prisoner was known as The Stare because he had so little skin left that he could not close his eyes. Resistance, yes, and on a heroic scale, but some cultural studies is in danger of focusing so closely on the heroism that it fails to see the surrounding gulag.

Theory is of little use if it does not help us imagine and then realize better futures for ourselves and future generations

Grossberg (1992)

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