

Method or Madness?
Textual Analysis in Media Studies

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Abstract

Scholarly analyses of media have tended to view the media text (e.g. film / programme / article) as the logical site of enquiry. However, this focus on the text has often resulted in a privileging of the text as the locus of meaning. The validity of textual analysis as a research method has increasingly been called into question due to the influence of poststructuralist theories and the critique of textually-based research emerging from the 'new audience studies'. In this paper I examine the debates surrounding texts, audiences and meanings from a poststructuralist perspective. I argue that the rethinking of subjectivity achieved by discourse theory provides the key to a new conception of textual analysis, which remains a vital and rewarding approach to the study of media and culture.

Introduction

This paper arises out of research on masculinities in New Zealand films done for my master's thesis (Havemann, 1997). I began my thesis research planning to examine how selected New Zealand films had represented men, and so deduce what sort of underlying messages about masculinity were contained within the texts. However, the more theory and research I read, the more it seemed that I had been misguided in thinking I could discover anything at all. Meaning, it seemed, could not be said to reside in the text at all. Within certain circles at least, the foundations of textual analysis were threatening to crumble under the weight of challenging critiques. These critiques seemed to emanate both from a poststructuralist rejection of the notion of fixed textual meaning and from audience researchers who wanted to put the readings of texts made by audiences (rather than media texts themselves) centre stage.

This paper represents my attempt to make sense of the debates surrounding the text/audience encounter. I especially focus on the implications of various positions for textual methodologies. Finally, I suggest that a model of texts and subjectivity drawn from discourse theory is compatible with, and productive for, both text and audience based methods of research.

Meaning as ideology: the text and its subjects

During the 1970s researchers began to take up the concept of ideology in the service of a politically engaged critique of popular/'mass' culture. Within film studies, theorists inspired by the rise of structuralism attempted to unlock the process by which the screen 'apparatus' communicated its message to the 'spectator'. Morley (1992) has used the term 'screen theory' to refer to this combination of semiotics, psychoanalysis and ideological theory which arose to challenge the dominant approaches within the discipline.

It was the concept of ideology as described in the work of Louis Althusser (1971), in conjunction with semiotic and psychoanalytical theories, which enabled 1970s film theorists to move beyond commonsense understandings of the audience, recasting the hypothetical viewer as both 'spectator' and 'subject'. According to Althusser, the subject (individual, self) is constituted through a

process of ideological ‘interpellation’ (hailing). The putative subject becomes subjected by recognising him- or her- self as the one interpellated. Ideology exists as a unified force which acts to reproduce the conditions of production (i.e. capitalism, in some feminist theories also including patriarchy) through various apparatuses. The media are described as ideological state apparatuses (ISAs).

The Althusserian model of ideology was taken up by left-wing film theorists who wished to investigate the ideological work being done by film, which they renamed the ‘cinematic apparatus’ (Mayne, 1993). This model represented a politically attuned alternative to the largely apolitical mainstream of film theory (which was dominated by the realism/formalism and genre/auteur debates). The ideological model was especially useful to feminists who, according to Teresa de Lauretis (1987), wished to examine “not only how gender is constructed by the given technology, but also how it becomes absorbed subjectively by each individual whom that technology addresses” (p. 13). Prominent feminist film theorists such as Mulvey (1975) and Gledhill (1978) consequently argued for a shift of focus away from the content of films (‘images of women’) and toward the workings of the apparatus itself.

Ideology 1.0: Screen theory

TEXT	AUDIENCE
Active	Passive
Site of meaning; textual analysis is logical research method	An idealised construct ‘implied’ in the text; ‘actual audiences’ (Ang) are ignored
The media are Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser); texts act to reproduce ideology / conditions of production	Receivers of ideological textual meaning; only those with special skills (e.g. knowledge of psychoanalysis, semiotics) are able to read texts ‘against the grain’

Within screen theory, “the analysis of textual structures alone was thought to be sufficient to comprehend how viewers are implicated in the texts they encounter” (Ang, 1989, p. 99). Researchers working within this framework were very much concerned with audiences, but elided actual viewers into an *implied viewer* constructed by the text (Ang, 1989, 1991; Mayne, 1993; Hughes, 1994).

Although screen theory provided a productive route into the realm of sexual difference and representation, its most difficult absence (the failure to address the diversity of readings made by actual audiences) brought researchers to an unfortunate impasse. If texts are always already ideologically determined and determining, then any analysis must inevitably lead to the same depressing conclusion of 'more of the same' audience powerlessness against ideology (Gamman and Marshment, 1988; Tasker, 1991).

While the approach of screen theory was both fresh and influential, it was not without its critics. Although they shared screen theory's commitment to ideological analysis, early cultural studies theorists nevertheless saw a need for a revised model of the text/audience relationship. The beginnings of 'active audience theory' can be traced to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in the 1970s. Members of the Centre's media group questioned the textual determinism of screen theory. According to Tasker (1993), screen theory promoted a notion of two 'levels of meaning' in the text, the first being the "*overt* pleasures" available to the audience and the second being "the *covert* ideological project" discernible to the researcher (p. 64). In contrast to this, Stuart Hall (1980) of the CCCS introduced a theory of *encoding* and *decoding*, according to which ideology is encoded into the text, but the viewer is understood to possess a degree of autonomy in the decoding process. Hall described the text as *polysemic*, meaning that multiple meanings were available to the decoder, but he warned that this did not equate to an infinite variety of readings. Instead, readings of the text were said to fall into three categories: *preferred*, *negotiated*, and *oppositional*.

The three possible reading positions represent the stance of the decoder of the text toward the ideological message encoded in it. A preferred reading is one which unproblematically 'reads off' the intended message; so, the preferred reading is not unlike the reading made by the interpellated spectator of screen theory. These categories are problematic, however, for it is unclear how a reading can be identified as 'preferred'. Morley sums up the dilemma: "is the preferred reading a property of the text, the analyst or the audience?" (1992, p. 122). This categorisation of audience diversity into three generalised reading factions can only make sense if the text is considered to have an *inherent* message or meaning.

Ideology 2.0: encoding/decoding

TEXT	AUDIENCE
Active	Active
Transmission	Reception
Polysemic yet containing a pre-encoded 'preferred reading' (Hall) which functions to reproduce the dominant ideology / social status quo	Producing readings which can be ideologically 'preferred' (or 'dominant'), 'negotiated', or 'oppositional' - activity is largely limited to accepting or rejecting the message

An apparent incompatibility separates those practices which aim to analyse the text and those which would instead analyse its reception. However, this evident methodological discrepancy has tended to obscure an underlying commonality between the two ideological approaches described above, which actually share an understanding of *communication as transmission*. As Sless (1986) has argued, the commonplace acceptance of a transmission model of communication relies upon the the image of a mechanical, technological transfer of information from A to B. The use of this metaphor (which in the 20th century has taken over from a metaphor of communication as sharing) promotes the idea that a particular message (which is distinct from its sender and receiver) can be communicated in a one-way, top-down direction from sender to receiver. But the transmission that occurs from, for example, TV station to TV set, is not the equivalent of the meaning making process undertaken by an audience; as such this image falls short of capturing the complexity of the communication process.¹

The ideological approaches to media, perceiving media as a conduit ('apparatus') enabling the transmission of ideology, have tended to work from generalisations about an undifferentiated audience of (apparently) 'empty vessels', ready to be interpellated as subjects, and an undifferentiated media ('the mass media'). These certainties could not last, however. As researchers became more interested in the agency and diversity of audience members, the subject of media studies was transformed. Poststructuralist and feminist theories of subjectivity and discourse

¹ Joshua Meyrowitz (1994) has pointed out that many of our understandings of media rely upon underlying metaphors (such as the persuasive metaphor of media as conduits, simply delivering the content).

have been a key influence in cultural and media studies work from the 1980s onwards. Before considering how such theories have been productive in relation to media, I will sketch in some of their salient features.

From ‘the subject’ to ‘subjectivities’

While many authors (e.g., Henriques et al., 1984; Weedon, 1989; Davies, 1991) have contributed to the discussion of discourses and subjectivities, a particular debt is owed to Michel Foucault whose various explorations of questions of power and discourse had at their core a common goal, namely “to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (Foucault, 1982, p. 208). Discourse theory understands subjectivity as the state of being (a) subject: being subjected by multiple discourses, and at the same time experiencing a sense of continuous selfhood. The key to this theory of subjectivity is that it is discursively constructed, and therefore multiple and contradictory. This more complex picture stands in contrast to the somewhat ‘brainwashed’ image of Althusser’s subject (Henriques et al., 1984).² The discursive subject is formed and re-formed through its multiple significations across a plethora of discourses, which may be compatible or clashing (Henriques et al., 1984). As Bronwyn Davies (1991) explains:

Subjectivity is constituted through those discourses in which the person is being positioned at any one point in time, both through their own and others’ acts of speaking / writing. One discourse that contradicts another does not undo one’s constitution in terms of the original discourse. One’s subjectivity is therefore necessarily contradictory. (p. 43)

In discourse theory, subjects, objects, and power relations are produced within discourses; discourses have material effects. Discourse theory perceives a world acted on and transformed by discourse, as against referential models of language as simply reflecting or describing reality. The objects discussed, categorised and evaluated by discourse are actually constituted within discourse, or rather within particular discourses, which impose their own conditions of possibility on particular statements, according to what Foucault (1980) called a “‘regime’ of

² The limitations of an ideological theory of the subject are expressed by Elspeth Probyn (1993) in her statement that “it is hard to imagine speaking positions that arise from Althusser’s conception of the subject” (p.135).

truth” (p. 133). The truth or falsity of a potential statement is also regulated according to the position of the subject doing (or perceived to be doing) the speaking (Foucault, 1981; Fairclough, 1992). A subject must have access to the position of ‘legitimate knower’ in order to make certain statements. Within any discourse, then, there are different subject *positions*, which are not freely available, but rather open only to certain categories of person (Fairclough, 1992; Weedon, 1987). For example, within medical discourses, the patient may be able to describe symptoms but only the doctor can produce a diagnosis. This positioning of subjects by discourse then also implies a field of power relations; to be a subject is to be more or less powerful in relation to other subjects.

Foucault recognised that different discourses could coexist, producing ‘parallel realities’ and different regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980, 1981). However, as Wendy Hollway (1984) notes, in practice, Foucault’s studies concentrated on particular historically existing discourses tied to particular institutional contexts. Hollway, a feminist psychologist, decided to modify Foucault’s method

in order to understand how at a specific moment several coexisting and potentially contradictory discourses concerning sexuality make available different positions and different powers for men and women. (p. 230)

It was in the context of this research that Hollway developed her theory of *investment*, according to which a person takes up the subject position made available in one discourse rather than another neither randomly, nor unwillingly, but because this position affords a relative power: “there will be some satisfaction or pay-off or reward” (p. 238).

The advantage of this version of subjectivity is that it encompasses a sense of *identity*, of being a person, situated historically and culturally. Crucially, this subjectivity is envisioned as multiple, shifting, and at times contradictory rather than unitary, fixed, or internally consistent. Due to its fragmented nature, the discursive subject is both acted on and active within the field of discourses, constantly re-produced and re-producing itself (Henriques et al., 1984; Davies, 1991). Perceptions that poststructuralists have effected some kind of erasure of the subject, or imagine a world manufactured out of discourse, are inaccurate. Poststructuralist discourse theory offers agency - an active role for the subject in the (trans)formation of both discourse and self - which is nevertheless constrained by a field of unequal discursive and power relations.

It seems crucial to me that, in constructing a model of the audience's relationship with the text, the model does not prejudge the content or behaviour of either. The space for identity created within the discursive model fills a vacuum in the understanding of media audiencehood I am working towards. The recognition of *differences* both between and within categories of persons (such as 'women' and 'men') provides a framework for considering how persons might be *differently positioned* by discourses according to configurations of gender, 'race', class (to name just three). Indeed, this suggestion is borne out by audience research focusing on particular socially-constituted groups (see for e.g. Schlesinger et al., 1992; Simms, 1995; Bobo, 1995). Such group memberships have been seen as a kind of 'vantage point' from which meanings (both interpretive and evaluative) can be made from a cultural representation. We can see each person as having access to a particular range of discourses to draw upon when reading (or authoring) a text. Most audience members could be assumed to have access to those discourses which are hegemonic or prevalent within relevant social and historical contexts. However, an audience member might also have access to what we might call 'other' discourses: the alternative or counter-hegemonic discourses of those designated as other, as opposed to hegemonic discourses *about* others. Consequently, meaning production is not simply confined to known/available discourses, but likely to be tied to a person's investments within particular discourses.

Meaning as productivity: the 'New Audience Studies'

John Corner (1991) uses the term 'New Audience Studies' to describe a body of work on audiences in which, he contends, "the question of an ideological level of media processes ... has slipped almost entirely off the main research agenda" (p. 267). These remarks signal a break between old and new audience researches although no truly firm line can be drawn between audience research based in encoding/decoding theory and the 'New Audience Studies' (NAS).³ Furthermore (as I shall discuss below), the NAS do not represent a careless departure from political concerns. Yet, if there is no historical moment which would define the

³ Consequently, it is an external label and not one which authors associated with it would necessarily welcome. Examples of research which could be included in this category include Ang (1985), Jenkins (1992), Stacey (1994) and essays in Seiter et al. (1989).

terms ‘before’ and ‘after’, there certainly has been a shift in terminology from ‘ideology’ to ‘discourses’, and from ‘reception’ to ‘production’ of meaning. A turn away from media texts, and from the idea that an essence of is meaning locked into them, has enabled a new research focus on the “infinite, contradictory, dispersed and dynamic practices of and experiences of television audiencehood enacted by people in their everyday lives” (Ang, 1991, p. 14).

The position of the text within the NAS framework is consequently quite different from its positioning by the ideological frameworks described above. In fact, the text almost threatens to disappear as the spotlight is trained on ‘actual audiences’ who now are understood as active, creative and sometimes critical *producers* of the cultural texts available to them. These phenomena (the simultaneous disappearance of the text and emancipation of the audience) can be explained as the effects of a move by NAS researchers away from a transmission model of communication, and towards something like the model of communication as position discussed by Sless (1986). Here I would like to turn again Sless’ communication model which (though describing the process of communication at an abstract level) is lucidly applicable to media theory. In the transmission model (which seems to underly ideological approaches to media) meaning is transferred from author, via text, to reader. According to Sless, rather than these three positions (author, text, reader), we can better conceive the communication process in terms of just two: the *author/text* and the *reader/text* (pp. 32-34). The text is not then a separate entity; it is indivisible from the acts of authoring and reading which, in different ways, ‘produce’ it. So, the notion of ‘the text itself’ becomes untenable as we instead imagine, within any act of communication, the existence of at least two texts. Communication is rewritten by Sless as a matter of position rather than transmission: “there is a great deal to recommend a metaphor based on the idea of a landscape within which are located both the researcher and the object of study” (p. 31).

The 'New Audience Studies'

TEXT	AUDIENCE
Passive	Active
Produced by industry and audience; provides 'raw materials' for readings	Meaning resides in the readings produced by active audiences who select, critique, poach, enjoy
Significant as a focal point around which an interpretive community comes together	Researchers seek out community of readers and examine their diverse reading practices and pleasures

The celebrated 'activity' of the audience has been perhaps media studies' greatest bone of contention in the 1980s and 90s. Morley (1994), aware that his own work is widely cited as evidence of this activity, protests that audiences are often now presented as routinely critiquing the representations they are offered and therefore able to 'deflect' any harmful effects. Against this tendency there has been a growing insistence that active or 'resistant' readings of texts not be taken as a sign that audiences are powerful in anything like the sense that transnational media empires are powerful (Morley, 1994; Hughes, 1996; Nightingale, 1993; Corner 1991).

Though in agreement with this latter point, Morley (1994) takes issue with Corner's (1991) suggestion that the turn to audiences represents a depoliticising trend within media studies. The trademark focus of ethnographic media research (much of which has also been underwritten by a feminist project) is on the particularity of experiences, on differences rather than sameness. As such, it rejects any false division between macro/political and micro/personal, instead understanding "macro structures [as] reproduced only through microprocesses" (Morley, 1994, p. 259).

In an insightful article entitled 'Producing Audiences', Patrick Hughes (1996) has attempted to reformulate the 'productivity' of audiencehood taking into account both the activity of the audience and the political economy of the media. Hughes suggests that audiences

‘actively’ produce meanings around cultural products as part of the continuing construction and reconstruction of their subjectivity/ies or sense(s) of self, but *they do so within discursive repertoires* which are increasingly liable to be determined by the dominant players in the [communications and cultural industries]. (p. 95, my emphasis)

At the level of the ethnographic, then, researchers can gain information about the uses that audiences put their limited agencies to. But there can be no ‘free market’ in discourses, subjectivities and representations. While critical power over popular media texts is an essential survival strategy in late modernity, it does not absolve those texts from theoretically informed scrutiny.

Conclusion: the author’s return

In examining these debates, I have attempted to argue for a theory in which audiences are understood as active participants in the process of making meaning. At the same time, I have attempted to show that the author (whether defined as a person or group) of a text does not determine once and for all how it is to be read. Nevertheless, the way in which the text is put together (including, but not limited to, the selection and sequence of words and images) must constrain the range of readings that can reasonably be made: as Hall (1980) recognised, polysemy is not an infinite plurality. Textual analysis can operate, I think, in this realm where the text both opens itself to plural meaning and attempts to fix certain meanings.

The dual phenomena of audience research’s apparent ‘return to the real’ (‘here’s what REAL people REALLY think about...’), on top of the quite valid critiques which have been mounted against structuralist textual analyses, have served (at least for some) to undermine the legitimacy of textual analysis in general. That is, there is a danger that audience research can be held up as having privileged access to the ‘truth’ of what a text is about. However, a closer look at audience research itself demonstrates that there is actually no escaping textual analysis. Audience research, while often paying little attention to the media text, seeks out data from a certain audience (as constituted within the research itself) and then interprets it. Audience studies therefore are the researcher’s (partial, situated) interpretation of an interpretation, or analyses of the audience text rather than the

media text (Hartley, 1993; Mayne, 1993; Morley, 1989, 1992; Hughes, 1996). These remarks are not intended as a criticism of audience research, which is no more 'subjective' than any other research method. This is precisely my point: knowledge based upon a prior claim by the researcher to being 'outside' (of ideology, of culture, of audiencehood) must be treated with caution.

A text only 'means' within specific spaces of encounter with its author(s) and reader(s), spaces which are situated within history, society and culture. So, as Janet Staiger (1993) points out, a reading of a text should be understood as an *event*, never to be repeated in quite the same way. The text can never be pinned down to an identifiable 'true meaning'. However, rather than take this fact as evidence that textual analysis must inevitably fail, we should move beyond the essentialist and illusory notion of the 'true meaning' itself (true to whom, when, in what culture?). As I see it, media studies (of whatever methodology) might rather focus on the multiple ways in which identities are articulated and constructed, contradicted and negotiated, across that blurred boundary between cultural representations and realities.

It is crucial that this debate does not remain trapped within the binary terms of 'text versus audience', textual analysis versus audience research. Whether the audience or the text is to be focal point for analysis, it is necessary to move beyond a faulty model of communication as transmission, and to recognise that the implied, unitary, normative subject often taken for granted in media analysis does not exist. The media researcher, much like the 'ordinary' media audience member, enters a world of texts demanding to be read and re-read. The difference between textual analysis and audience analysis consequently becomes one of emphasis, where the former emphasises the author/text relation, and the latter the reader/text relation.

It is worth considering the significance of the author/text relation for media studies. Perhaps it is fair to say that reports of the death of the author have been greatly exaggerated. Glance sideways from media studies at adjacent communication fields (such as public relations, journalism, rhetorical and literary studies, media production) and the concept of the author seems alive and well. Yet, in media studies, it is commonplace, almost axiomatic, to claim that what the makers of the text *intended* is somehow unimportant or irrelevant to the task at hand. Instead, special tools will be used to (a) find out what it really means by reading the cultural unconscious through the medium of the text or (b) find out

what it really means by asking the audience what they think it really means (because what the author intended is obviously unimportant). This mass denial of authorship is presented as somehow more theoretically rigorous than asking ‘simplistic’ questions about what an author intended; again, I quote Sless (1986): “the author always creates an image of a reader; similarly the reader creates an image of an author” (p.35).

When I say that textual analysis could emphasise the author/text relation, I mean that the researcher, although accessing the meanings of the text from the position of reader, attempts to look through the text at the author. While available knowledge of the actual author can be very limited, there is nevertheless use-value in asking ‘why was the text constructed this way rather than another way?’, ‘what projected audience was this text designed for?’, and also, ‘how do I respond to this text and why?’. This, I think, is what Kobena Mercer (1991) means when he calls for cultural studies to consider the ‘politics of enunciation’. Using the example of Robert Mapplethorpe’s controversial photography of black male nudes, Mercer asserts that there can be no simple classification of the images as ‘negrophilia’ or ‘negrophobia’:

the statement ‘the black man is beautiful’ takes on different meanings... Does the same statement mean the same thing when uttered by a white woman, a black woman, a white man, or a black man? Does it mean the same thing whether the speaker is straight or gay? (p. 193)

So, a reader’s projected image of authorial identity and intent is an integral part of the process of reading.⁴ And just as the ‘reader/text’ contains a projected ‘author/text’, so too must we, as researchers, reflect on just what it means when we become authors of theory and analysis and design messages for our imagined readers.

As mentioned above, media researchers have in the past tended to claim for themselves a sort of non-position outside of the communication processes they analyse. According to Sless (1986), such researchers claim objectivity and yet, ultimately, “are actually studying their own readings of texts, offering their imagination as evidence” (p. 22). The problem, I think, lies not so much in the fact of researchers studying our own readings of texts, but in the failure to

⁴ Only if we recognise this complex interplay of positions does the notion of ‘reading against the grain’ become viable.

acknowledge locatedness as a necessary condition of knowledge rather than an impediment to it. Where in fact, can anyone claim to speak from, except from the self? Rather than ignoring or lamenting subjectivity, the self can be ‘put to work’ for us; as Elspeth Probyn (1993) suggests: “I consider the possibilities of speaking selves to be great, and the liabilities of an untheorized return to the ‘I’ to be even greater” (p. 11).⁵

The ‘I’ from which analyses of media texts (and audiences) emerge has too often been grounded in the ‘authority’ of the expert, abstract subject. Yet, at the other pole, there is a risk of ‘authorising’ a kind of essentialist, and yet ultimately relativising discourse: ‘my experience was this, therefore I can’t be wrong’. As an alternative, we might turn the insights into subjectivity offered by discourse theory back on ourselves. In critically, and questioningly, speaking from the site of the multiply constituted self (a self which is raced but also, to begin with, classed and gendered) we might begin to produce different forms of knowledge. We can never piece together a true and complete map of the world. Instead, we will have albums and albums of unique snapshots.

⁵ And see Couldry (1996) for a compellingly argued appraisal of Probyn’s work.

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