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“Summary of article by David Morley: Theories of Consumption in Media Studies”

In the early 1930s, leading cultural analysts believed that media institutions had the ability to influence consumer behaviors and induce passivity among audiences. In contrast, contemporary researchers in the field of media studies conceive audiences as more active, choosing and interpreting a greater range of media products. This paper discusses the major themes and debates of media consumption research since the rise of television and film, illustrating the importance of gender to recent media studies.

ARE AUDIENCES PASSIVE OR ACTIVE?

Media research has oscillated between perspectives that stress the power of the media to dominate audiences and perspectives that view media consumption as an active, creative process. The Frankfurt School of Social Research set the terms of this debate as fascism rose to prominence during the 1930s. Led by Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Max Horkheimer, the Frankfurt School developed the idea that mass culture weakens social ties, creates widespread isolation, and leaves individuals vulnerable to whoever controls the media. Media institutions act as culture industries that inject their messages, like hypodermic needles, directly into the minds of passive individuals who collectively constitute the mass audience.

Each aspect of this view has come under attack in subsequent media research. Unlike the theoretical approach of the Germans, American researchers in the 1940s adopted an empirical research agenda that qualified the notion of media power, demonstrating that media's social effects were complex, indirect, and mediated by audiences. In the 1960s, British researchers rejected the then common view that mass audiences are homogeneous, arguing that individuals respond differently to media messages based on their psychological make-up. This approach, however, neglected the role of cultural influences by exaggerating the importance of psychological factors.

Stuart Hall in 1973 argued that media content must be decoded before it has an effect on the audience. A dialectic exists between media institutions that encode media messages and audiences that interpret or decode them. In his view, media institutions encourage a preferred reading of the media text, but individuals will vary in how they understand its content given cultural differences arising from their social background. The 1970s also gave rise to Screen Theory, which focused on the analysis of films and media texts; the messages displayed in films (principally) and television programs. Influenced by both feminism and psychoanalytic discourses, Screen Theory revived the hypodermic model by assuming that it was possible to

deduce audience reactions from analyses of media texts. Its sophisticated analyses of the ways in which film texts attempt to “position” their viewers, however, rely too much on a psychoanalytic model of human development and understates the role of social and historical influences.

More current research has recognized that technological advances are empowering consumers as never before. For instance, video technologies allow greater choice and control over when and what programs will be viewed. Some researchers caution that there is a difference between having power over a text, (i.e., when and what will be watched) and power over the agenda within which the text is produced. Being active with a remote control is different from being powerful. Others have criticized recent advances, arguing that some cultural studies, in their rush to analyze the active consumer, have lost their critical perspective, becoming apologists for mass culture.

If the problem with the Frankfurt School was that its members were too elitist, too far outside the culture they examined, many cultural studies writers today have the opposite problem -- they are so concerned not to be 'elitist' that they fall into a mode of populism -- immersed in popular culture themselves, half in love with their own subject, they seem unable to achieve the proper critical distance from it, and end up writing apologies for mass culture.¹

MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Changes in media technologies influence the nature of consumption as well as gender and class relations. Historically, commercial support of television has influenced consumption by sponsoring the programs that are consumed by audiences and promoting consumption of its products. However, the recent innovation of home shopping networks have linked these types of consumption in an unprecedented way. With the possibility that more shopping, banking, working and leisure will be done at home through computers and interactive media, gender relations in the domestic setting will be increasingly affected by media technologies. Also, increasing privatization of television access through cable and pay-per-view options tends to diminish effective citizen participation by members of society who lack the resources to buy the new technologies.

MEDIA AND GENDER

In recent years, media studies has shifted some of its focus from the debate over audience activity/passivity to the domestic context of media consumption. A growing literature is examining the use of particular media technologies in families within specific cultural domains. This approach was initiated by the work of Hobson (1982) and Radway (1984) who raised questions about the home as a gendered space and the significance of gender relations in the consumption of television and other media. Hobson discussed the use of media by housewives to counter isolation in the home, while Radway explored how housewives combated domestic pressures by reading romantic fiction.

Their work is extended by the author in two studies. The *Family Television Study* (1986) examined how gender influences the consumption of television.

The "Family Television" study was designed to explore, through interviews with family members, the issues arising once one takes the family (or household), rather than the individual viewer in isolation, as the effective 'unit of consumption' of television...Once one considers TV viewing in the context of domestic relations, one inevitably raises the question of power relations, and within the domestic sphere these power relations are principally constructed by gender. (321)

The study was conducted in an urban white, lower-middle-class to affluent working-class culture in Britain. It found that men had more control than women over program choice; men planned their viewing in advance, while women tended to have more ambivalent attitudes toward television; and, men viewed programs more attentively, more often than women, who would often only watch programs while doing some other activity.

The second study, directed by Roger Silverstone at Brunel University between 1987-1990, was called *Household Uses of Information and Communication Technology*. It investigated how gender affects the incorporation of new technologies into the home. The rationale for this project was that there exist gendered domains of competence in the home, just like math and science are defined as primarily male domains in the public sphere, and that these domains will affect how media technologies are used in the home. "The central issue is how different technologies are incorporated into particular, gender-designated domains of culture competence - according to cultural roles defining their appropriateness' for individuals..." (323) This study as well as others have found that media technologies become gendered upon introduction to the home. For instance, research has shown that in certain cultures the video cassette recorder, the computer as well as computer games are viewed as technologies requiring male competency.

Notes

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1. Cited on page 308 of Morley. The passage is from Modleski, T. (ed.) (1986) *Studies in Entertainment*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. xi.