The Television Text: Spectatorship, Ideology, and the Organization of Consent

George Bagley

□—The problem with popular polarizations in television reception research is that either quantitative or qualitative methodologies considered separately fails to render a complete understanding. Television viewing is both individual and collective. Thus this paper proposes an analytical framework synthesized from alternate approaches not conventionally petitioned in reception research, among them Gramsci’s consent theory, which identifies a logical and justifiable space for both considerations, a means of accounting for the ebbs and flows of both individual and collective forces continuously at work in culture and in television reception.

In the slippery field of television audience research, spectatorship may be variously defined though it’s principally a question of what viewing means to the receiver. In communication studies, that question has historically lent itself to quantitative/empirical modalities, the idea of measurable affective phenomena upon controlled subject groups, data then statistically generalized to populations at large. Some, however, suggest the need for an alternate analytical model, one accounting for the inevitable subjectivities each viewer possesses, a venture away from the quantifiable externalities of the collective group and toward the highly differentiated internalities constituting the individual. Unfortunately, the usual outcome of such discussions is polarization. There seems no easy reconciliation here between the two positions, no clever compromise between apparently hopeless antagonisms.

The problem is that separately either approach renders an incomplete understanding. This paper proposes instead an ambitious reach across several disciplines not conventionally petitioned in television research. Thus in place of the familiar polarizations, such a model would arrive at a synthetic understanding accommodating both points of view, an analytical framework beginning in literary and film reception theory, but also juxtaposed to some critical cultural theory, itself an amalgam of various disciplines and scholarly approaches, specifically the ideas of Antonio Gramsci whose consent theory helps qualify the apparently infinite variability of reception and individual subjectivity. This kind of synthesis really seems the only logical approach to a phenomenon as complex and protean as television reception. It’s a view framing reception in cul-

George Bagley is an Assistant Professor in the Nicholson School of Communication at the University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL 32816-1344. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Broadcast Education Association, April 1998.
tural organization, identifying television as a dynamic instrument capable of accommodating the ebbs and flows of both individual and collective forces continuously at work in culture.

**Quantitative Rationales**

The problem one quickly discovers in television reception research is the exclusivity of the two dominant scholarly camps. The most prevalent of these, and the one historically invoked, is the quantitative method. In her effort to nail down the origin of that analytic modality, Medsger (1996) identifies its inevitable beginnings in television’s rapid growth during the mid-1950’s. The medium’s phenomenal emergence as unparalleled mass communication naturally directed human behavior scholars to communications research. They were interested, Medsger claims, in the media’s impact on specific demographic groups and the population at large—“what a mass audience was and how it behaved” (p. 55)—always in terms of the unified audience and the monolithic message.

Such an approach seems attractive enough because television viewing strikes one first as a considerably shared phenomenon, large numbers of individuals consuming the same visual and acoustical information, often at the same time. For example, in 1997 between late September and early October, the average rating for the top ten prime time television programs—a measurement of homes tuned into a given program out of all homes nationally with a television—was 18.09. That means that for each of those ten programs, nearly 18 million viewers tuned in. The most watched program for that period was NBC’s *ER* with a total rating of 23.3, or around 23 million viewers (People’s Choice, October 1997). The undisputed ratings king in the United States, the NFL Super Bowl, annually cuts across not only broad geographic boundaries but social, political, gender, and age divisions as well. In 1999, Super Bowl XXXIII became the third most watched television program in television history. NFL Enterprises’ official web site states that in the United States alone more than 133.4 million viewers witnessed the event, and it was broadcast additionally to 144 countries and territories, bringing the total viewership to more than 800 million households worldwide, translated into 17 languages (NFL.com, 1998).

Even cable TV, with its smaller audiences, manages on occasion to muster broad and devoted collective attention. For example, as of October 1998, nearly ninety thousand individuals contributed to just one of many Internet discussion groups devoted to one of cable TV’s more popular programs, MTV’s *The Real World*. Topics in these discussion groups ranged from the relative health of cast members to their anatomy, their respective accents, and the dynamics between them all (Dejanews.com, 1998).

These numbers tell a larger story. Incidents like the Super Bowl have come to be known as *television events*, and despite the term’s overuse in broadcast promotion, it implies nonetheless a kind of uniform attraction, at the very least some kind of congruence among the audience, some kind of mutual appeal sustaining the breadth of popularity characteristic of these programs. This notion of shared viewership is only fortified, some might argue even justifiably, by anecdotal evidence like that from Brian Harte, a congressional analyst for the Heritage Foundation, who describes how he and his friends...
regularly shared predictions for how, at the height of the show’s popularity, the plot for each episode of Fox’s *Melrose Place* would finally turn out, or from one “high-placed official” at the Pentagon who discussed the show every Thursday morning with journalists assigned to his beat (Wild, 1994, p. 53). More recently, *USA Today* reported that “bars and restaurants all over the USA [staged] viewing parties” for another television event, the final episode of the popular sitcom *Seinfeld*. A restaurant in Springfield, Virginia, the newspaper claimed, even boasted new delicacies on its menu inspired specifically by the show’s characters during its nine-year run. Roger Clark, owner of *C. J. Nickels*, the restaurant in question, claimed that this final episode marked the “end of an era and we want to be a part of it” (Graham & Bianco, 1998). Clark’s explanation implies the degree to which a fictionalization like *Seinfeld* may cross the boundaries of imagination to connect with and suggest social practice.

If this kind of evidence fails to connect television viewing to shared cultural consciousness, others point further to the medium’s measurement of commercial viability, its sole reliance on quantifiable demographic data. Numbers represent the kind of scientific evidence attractive to quantitative research, the supposition that television undeniably works itself upon the group uniformly and democratically—what affects one, it’s assumed, potentially affects all. In a longitudinal survey, the historical viewing patterns of individuals were measured and compared to determine the degree to which the length of exposure to violent depictions on television suggests subsequent violent behavior among children (Cantor & Nathanson, 1997). Others seek to isolate a given variable by its direct manipulation within a control group, thereby eliminating extraneous variables to perform a more direct measurement. In such a study, the duration of one’s gaze at the televised image was directly manipulated in an attempt to determine just how duration informs information retention (Hawkins, Pingree, Bruce & Tapper, 1997), or in another instance of the same investigative method whether television news images prompting disgust among control subjects will cause viewers to reject or tune out the news message (Newhagen, 1998).

Since television is a mass medium—programming simultaneously consumed by large numbers of individuals—one is tempted in these instances to conceptualize the audience *en masse*. If a single variable may be isolated among a controlled population and corresponding results scientifically measured, or if one may detect from longitudinal data correlative connections to what or how one views, it is indeed possible, in terms of statistical validity, to account for and predict television’s effect upon the general audience. What some find most troubling, however, with effects-exclusive approaches like these is how the audience comes off as highly malleable, capable of seemingly endless manipulation by agents, and how television’s images and sounds pose as strict determinants upon that audience.

In this context, Press (1996) problematizes even the very term *audience* because of its inextricable connections to determinism and the passive group. One should more appropriately, she notes, examine the very subjective interplay between people as audience and as the embodied constitution of “meanings, rituals, practices, struggles,
and structural roles and realities that make up the rest of their lives,” variables that constitute a realm “somewhat resistant to quantitative methodology” (p. 113). Thus the alternative of choice to quantitative methodologies is one dedicated to the possibility of active construction by the viewer, one mindful of the degree to which that construction may be individuated from viewer to viewer.

Others, like Hall (1986) and Morley (1985), lay the same claim. The real determinants of how we process television content, Hall proposes, are bound up in ideology, the “languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation” that individuals accumulate as they live out their lives among different social groups and classes (Hall, 1986, p. 29). Morley notes that dependence upon “demographic and sociological factors” alone limits our understanding of phenomena like television reception (Morley, 1985, pp. 243–4). The narrow scope of that focus, both authors imply, remains locked in externality. In other words, quantitative methodologies miss the other half of the story. By overlooking individual cognition and how that may be constituted, strictly quantitative/empirical approaches fail to represent the viewer as “active in all kinds of ways,” constructing and criticizing in response to a wide variety of external and internal variables (Morley, 1992, p. 18).

### The Television Text

Livingstone (1991), in her attempt to remedy the shortsightedness of strictly quantitative methodologies, demonstrates first a clear case for what she describes as the heterogenous act of viewing. Proceeding along logical lines similar to Morley, Hall, Press and others, she seeks to define and apply a “literary critical, reader-reception orientation to traditional problems of the television audience” (p. 287). She assumes the television as text, which consequently justifies her appeal to the critical work of literary theorists like Iser (1978) and Eco and their attention to the role of the reader in constructing meaning out of the literary text. The essential assumption behind such positions is that the text is anything but monolithic, its meaning anything but inherent and dictatorial. Rather, meaning in the text only arises through the act of reading. It’s the reader’s activity, Iser and others proclaim—his or her assumptions, selections and organizations—that bring the literary work into existence (Iser, 1974, pp. 274–275). Livingstone writes that “we must discover the actual cognitions and circumstances of the viewer if we are to understand the relationship between [television] reader and text” (Livingstone, 1991, p. 297), which is to shift the emphasis of analysis away from an assumed centralized meaning in the medium itself and toward process, the dialectic encounter between reader and text.

Thus the role of the consumer-reader becomes paramount. Without him or her, the text is reduced to print on a page, words or sounds from a box. For her part, Livingstone directly applies such a model to television soap opera to demonstrate that, unlike prevailing supposition, the genre is indeed not ideologically closed, not the normative agent for the audience that it has often been assumed to be. She concludes that possibilities of meaning for soap opera viewers are tied into issues of identification, the actual viewing context of the individual, and the audi-
ence’s knowledge and motivations (Livingstone, 1991, p. 300).

Still, dialogue like this isn’t really new. Since roughly the turn of the twentieth century, film theory demonstrated its persistent interest in the point of intersection between individual and film text. In one of the great misfortunes of television and film scholarship, there has historically been little dialogue between these two overlapping media, despite their close parallels to each other. Instead each has looked upon itself to discover its own answers to the persistent myopic exclusivity of either purely deterministic or subjective models of reception analysis.

Film’s rich argumentative history predates television analysis. Unlike television studies, however, film theory early structured itself away from the positivistic approaches more characteristic of communications studies and toward interpretive orientations, particularly literary studies and the idea of the film as text, though the field has nevertheless demonstrated its own indeterminacy respecting exactly what viewing means and what it performs. Munsterberg’s (1916) contemplations, for instance, focused on those forces external to the self to explain the perceptual process of viewing, the phi phenomenon, and consequently did little to illuminate the complexities of individual cognition in the act. His views, like more recent spectatorship theory in the 1970’s associated with individuals like Metz and Mulvey, favored the monolithic text and the consuming audience. Metz (1982) characterized the viewer as a “vacant spectator at once alienated and happy . . . hooked up . . . by an invisible thread of sight” (p. 97), which coincided neatly with Mulvey’s (1975) seminal work entitled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey supposes that the central position of the viewer is one dominated by the male gaze, a position reducing spectatorship to Oedipal constructs of desire and fetishism, always from the implication of the gendered film text.

Despite their popularity at the time, like exclusively quantitative approaches to television reception, positions like these have recently undergone some very pointed criticism. If, for example, one accepts the centrality of the male gaze, one also accepts spectators as unified and viewing as a homogeneous act, the film text uniformly performing its work upon each viewer. This is one of the dominant intersections between film and television discourses. One film scholar, Linda Williams (1995), sounding much like Hall and Morley, comes to their same general conclusion. The limitations of Mulvey’s position, she claims, is that it envisions a collective audience captivated by the dominant image, vacant spectators each receiving and processing the same visual stimuli equally and indistinguishably (p. 3). Likewise, Mayne (1995) points up the difficulties of apprehending the “single film within which a variety of not necessarily harmonious discourses collide . . .” (p. 171). The film text can have unexpected effects, Mayne notes; it often fails to run as smoothly as Mulvey envisions it. Spectators bring a lot of baggage to the act composed of a “variety of discourses,” understandings derived from the countless experiences constituting individual consciousness (Mayne, 1995, p. 157).

Given the obvious intersections between reception in either medium—television or film—is it not logical that each look to the other for additional
enlightenment? (Which isn’t to say that the two are perfectly synonymous with one another. Certainly one could divert here to protracted contrasts between subjective and objective viewing habits, the commercial theater versus the domestic livingroom or bedroom, for example; though at a time when television is becoming an increasingly centralized point of distribution for both film and traditional television texts, arguments like these are not so universal as they once were.) Hoijer (1992), working in the communication studies domain, capitalizes on ideas like those set out by Williams and Mayne, and her work is worth noting here because it stands as a remarkable attempt to unite the twin perspectives of collectivity and subjectivity in television viewing, a union she terms the “missing link” in reception research (p. 584).

Spheres of Existence

Unlike separatist arguments, Hoijer sets forth first a cognition that is the product of a complex dialectic between inner and outer spheres of experience and existence, each acting upon the other in a continuous process of give and take, and for her purposes Hoijer divides the inner/outer world dialectic into three distinct categories: universal, cultural, and private (p. 586). This is what’s so unique in her undertaking. Hoijer attempts here to shed light on the phenomenon of television reception by supposing it as a point of convergence between these separate spheres, thus a common space for collectivity and subjectivity alike. Steeped in measurements of variables external to the self, she claims, quantitative methodologies alone represent a “macro perspective,” aiming strictly to determine just how the phenomenon of viewing affects the collective audience, but not its wide variations from individual to individual (p. 584).

We are all cultural beings Hoijer proposes; our manners of thought, our beliefs and values, arise from our exposure to various levels at which we exist individually and collectively, and these are finally inseparable from each other. We work in a given environment with others, we play, we worship, we travel. Yet our consciousness is also influenced, in no small measure, by such things as the psycho-dynamics of our familial existence, or by the narratives we absorb throughout our lives from films or literature or from folk tradition, and even by our own predispositions as individual beings. In other words, Hoijer claims that by intersecting in this manner, these webs create the dynamic consciousness, the self as the complex and individualized composition of a variety of discourses.

To demonstrate her point, Hoijer directs her reader first to those experiences which we all share as members of the human race. She cites “death, birth, childhood, ageing . . . health and illness” as well as everyday concerns like feeding, working and loving, as examples of those universal experiences human beings have in common. Cultural activities are narrower in that they arise from our membership within a given society or culture, or even sub-culture, Gender and social class, for example, actively construct the way we think, feel, and believe, suggesting normative behaviors and attitudes shaped by our membership in these given groups. On the other hand, private experiences are those “unique to you as an individual” (p. 586), and Hoijer indicates that despite any degree of homogeneity existing within a
given culture or society, we are “born with different abilities and personalities” that always qualify universal and cultural contexts (pp. 586–7).

The lines between all three spheres—universal, cultural, private—Hoijer contends are not clearly demarcated—they’re “partly fluid,” and the edges between them are “blurred” (p. 587). This would seem to suggest that no one sphere dominates another. As proof she suggests human illness which is at once universal—representing conditions all humans experience—while at the same time private since it is ultimately individually possessed. And even beyond these two distinctions, illness is cultural since many ailments may directly relate to one’s membership within given cultural or social orders. For example, a woman or a man may experience illnesses in a uniquely gender-specific manner, or a coal worker may suffer from respiratory ailments that others may not (p. 587). These different realms converge in the individual, according to Hoijer, as the source of meaning construction in such things as encounters with the television text.

Thus instead of the linear directness characteristic of arguments like Mulvey’s and the great body of 1970’s film theory as well as communication studies, Katz (1988), for one, proposes an alternate series of questions researchers should ask, questions that apparently seem to coincide smoothly with Hoijer’s analysis: “What is the text? Where do values inhere? Who is the viewer addressed by the text? Who is the viewer in fact? What role is he or she playing? What is the immediate viewing context? What is the nature of the society within which the viewer is decoding the message?” (p. 367).

Yet where exactly does this leave us? If we accept, as Livingstone suggests, that the television text contains within it the very real possibility, the reality even, of “divergent interpretations” of the same visual and acoustical material (Livingstone, 1991, p. 288), there seems the equally real possibility that one may have to resort to the hazards of pluralism. If the spectator may be infinitely constituted through a multiplicity of social, political, and cultural discourses, reception is infinitely variable, and the task of rendering any kind of complete, encompassing theory respecting viewing seems hopeless. The text thus becomes only what its viewer creates for it which, according to Mayne, merely replaces one form of monolithic authority with another (Mayne, 1995, p. 159).

Herein lies the fundamental criticism toward reception theory’s dependence on subjective analysis, and to her credit Livingstone acknowledges the limitations of the model when she addresses its tendency toward pluralism and its proclivity to see “all viewers as equally powerful” (Livingstone, 1991, p. 303). Like Livingstone, many find such a loose analytical structure critically untenable. To the scientific method, pluralism is a thorny path because it forecloses on possibilities of replication, a concern compounded by its anathema: television’s obvious potential for collective appeal, simultaneity, and normalization that in truth can’t be overlooked.

Further, one troubling prospect complicates an analytical model like Hoijer’s. Her ideas begin as an intriguing compromise between pluralism and individuality, but in the end even her brilliant pursuit toward convergence is overshadowed by her dicey assertion that the individual sphere will always supercede collective understanding and
experience. As she applies her ideas to fourteen subjects, all of whom were shown a science program addressing the medical and psychological consequences of HIV and AIDS, Hoijer concludes that each of her subjects processed the same television content differently according to “diversified interpretation patterns” arising from his or her unique individual spheres (Hoijer, 1992, p. 599). The real missing link here seems to be integration, something Hoijer valiantly attempts, but in the end surrenders. Meanwhile, the researcher is left to align with one polarity or another. Montrose (1989), writing in response to just such a dilemma in literary criticism, concludes that this kind of bipolarity will inevitably fail to render a thorough understanding because it’s finally “so reductive, polarized, and undynamic as to be of little or no conceptual value” (p. 22).

Thus any model proposing to render meaningful value to the field of reception studies must avoid the logical errors of exclusivity. It must steer clear of deterministic rationales alone since these reduce the individual viewer to a camera obscura of the monolithic text. At the same time, however, it must somehow consolidate the individual variabilities of self into some kind of unified understanding. To be truly successful, it would have to calculate a viewer who is at once the particular construct of subjective experience, and whose encounter with the television text proceeds first from that construct, but a viewer who is also the member of larger social and cultural groups with shared values and understandings, and it would necessarily consider the television text’s inextricable connections to culture, ideology, and social process.

Thus, a truly integral approach to television studies should account for both individual and collective identity and constitution. It would be a model deciphering the complexities of that co-existence, the process whereby individual becomes—merges with—the collective. This seems a very broad umbrella, particularly resistant to the kind of unity researchers seek. How can one theoretical approach manage this kind of inclusiveness? The answer is that it can’t. Instead, television reception analysis should be multi-disciplinary, a synthetic model borrowing upon sound analysis from other scholarly fields that provide insight into the complexities of such concerns common to each discipline, concerns like consent, collective organization, and even ideological distribution.

**Consent Theory**

This sounds a lot like cultural theory, and indeed it seems appropriate to jump start such an extended analytical model with that discipline. First, cultural organization is itself a collection of the various ideas of other disciplines like anthropology, literary theory, and sociology, each addressing one or another aspect of individual and collective behavior and cognition. Second, and perhaps most important, cultural theory looks to understand how each of us comes together under one ideological framework, each thinking through things critically on his or her own, yet ultimately aligning oneself to a common understanding. This kind of analysis seems particularly suited to the questions of this paper and the dilemma facing television reception research.

In the 1970’s, cultural theorists queued up along the logical line that human consciousness may be viewed
as a complex of interacting webs between the self and the rest of the “social-historical world” (Dilthey, 1990, p. 36). It’s the nature of that intersection that holds out the promise of integration to television scholars. One cultural theorist in particular, Antonio Gramsci, an Italian neo-Marxist, demonstrates how his concept of convergence between these webs distinguishes from Hoijer’s spheres. As he accounts for cultural harmony, Gramsci structures convergence as a process, an exercise of consent toward common understandings, which also excellently catalyzes the argument this paper intends to make that analyses of television reception, if the phenomenon is to be understood completely, must proceed from convergence.

Gramsci’s writings are voluminous—nearly two-and-a-half thousand pages of laborious notes taken during his political imprisonment in 1926 by the Mussolini Fascist government until his death ten years later—and identify the dynamic formation, structure, and operation of cultures (Bennett, Martin, Mercer, & Woollacott, 1981, p. 191). Those webs of lived relations we encounter daily throughout our lives and that are external to us, Gramsci maintains, intersect with the internal dynamics of our individuality and stage hegemony, a form (in fact, for Gramsci the only truly successful form) of cultural organization in which many individuals from various groups come to willingly align themselves to a single cultural “climate” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 349), and this is critical since Gramsci always factors individuality into his concept of cultural organization. In fact, for him the very act of a mass of individuals coming together in a coherent ideology is an incomparable philosophical event (p. 325).

His hegemony takes shape in his response to the idea, specifically Marxism, that individuals “operate...under...presuppositions and conditions independent of [their] will” (Marx & Engels, 1974, pp. 46–7), that we are not so much acting as acted upon. Such a theoretical position is, for Gramsci, preposterous since it reduces individual constitution and cultural organization to simple determinism, ignoring the complex exchange between individual understanding, the will and collective views. In very unflattering terms he concludes that this is nothing more than “primitive infantilism” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 407), and he proposes instead a culture of individual activity, one in which we are called upon daily to exercise our will either consenting to, or dissenting from, the common views and understandings we encounter outside the private individual self.

Gramsci goes to great lengths differentiating this type of voluntaristic culture from one characterized by coercion. “A class is dominant in two ways,” he suggests, through intellectual and moral leadership or through resort to material force (p. 57n). But once the latter takes place, the dominant group no longer leads but compels which Gramsci feels represents the beginning of the end. At such a point, “the great masses have become detached” from the ideological glue of their respective culture (p. 275), hegemony has been dissolved, and individual alignment to the common world view is no longer voluntaristic, the product of one’s own consideration and selection.

This is a process that depends most fundamentally on the exercise of one’s will. We are thus faced again with the specter of individuation which could, as it does in television reception studies, pose enormous problems. If
we are each acting on our own, making
decisions from our own individual will,
testing, weighing, accepting or reject-
ing cultural views independently, then
cultural organization stands to be in
great chaos, a divergent mass of plural-
ism, precisely the kind of conclusion
that threatens reception theory. Yet
this idea of the independent will is
nevertheless absolutely critical to
Gramsci’s notions of cultural organiza-
tion, since coercing individuals is only
a temporary, futile gesture that in the
end can’t hold up to resistance from
subordinate groups, thus an unstable
cultural model.

The principle question Gramsci poses
is how the independent exercise of will
among a mass of individuals may lead to
collective organization. How does the
subjective self come to unite with others
in ideological harmony? This is the point
at which Gramsci’s cultural theory neatly
coalesces with reception research. His
problem—creating a space for both indi-
vidual and collective activity—is pre-
cisely the dilemma posed by the pheno-
menon of television spectatorship, and
the key for Gramsci lies in the nature of
our choices. He wonders rhetorically
whether it’s better to “think without hav-
ing a critical awareness,” to “take part in
a conception of the world mechanically
imposed” by external agents, or whether
it’s better to “work out consciously and
critically one’s own conception of the
world” (p. 323). In other words, the best
kind of individual consciousness is self-
possessed, the product of one’s own cog-
nitive labor. His hegemony is indeed
collective, shared by the mass of individu-
als, yet that collectivity will always re-
main connected to an a priori conscious
exercise of individual will, a will at-
tracted, consenting, to the common view.

Consent to that view is attractive
because it’s the direct result, according
to Gramsci, of the “compromise equi-
librium” worked out between cultur-
ally dominant groups and all other
groups within the culture (Gramsci,
1971, pp. 57–8), an equilibrium articu-
lated at the ideological level in which
at least some of the essential compo-
nents of one’s own belief system, what-
ever the class or group to which one
belongs finds representation within the
dominant ideology. By necessarily ac-
knowledging at least some of “the inter-
est and the tendencies of the groups
over which hegemony is to be exer-
cised” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 161), the lead-
ing group musters a fusion of values
and understandings that has become,
for all intents and purposes, an “or-
ganic totality” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 327).
And even though this fusion, as Gram-
sci carefully points out, is not an ide-
ological equality, since within a hege-
mony one class must always necessarily
lead, must always necessarily domi-
nate the common world view, it is
nonetheless harmonious because the
dominant understanding seems to be
in our best interest; it sufficiently ac-
cords in some way, or ways, to our
own personalized world view, thus we
willfully consent. Thus collective orga-
nization is a two-stage process
grounded first in reception and one’s
encounter with ideological views, and
second in one’s recognition of ideologi-
cal self-representation which stages a
significant enough attraction as to war-
rant the view’s acceptance or possibly
rejection if the attraction fails to suffi-
ciently materialize.

Public/Private Dissemination

Elsewhere Gramsci indicates that
within this fusion, voluntarism is pos-
sible only insofar as the masses have
sufficient opportunity to weigh out the
common views and understandings laid before them to work out one’s own conception of existence. In other words, for cultural equilibrium to be achieved there must be the means for ideological exchange between dominant and subordinate groups that provides the opportunity for the exercise of consent. While this seems obvious enough, it would be difficult to overestimate its importance to Gramsci’s project. The kind of consent Gramsci describes may arise only from a foundation of information and ideological exposure. Althusser (1969), writing much later than Gramsci though nevertheless in agreement on this point, suggests that social distribution of the commonly accepted ideology occurs pervasively in societies, that it is indeed far reaching. “Human societies,” Althusser notes, “secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life” (p. 233).

For Gramsci, this is—must be—more than purely political; it may be discovered in the political sphere, but this is only one avenue of its distribution. Gramsci considers equally the role of the “private apparatus” in hegemony’s construction and maintenance, the institutions and material structure of civil society (Gramsci, 1971, p. 161). There remains, then, the principle question respecting the exact civil form(s) of ideological distribution, the apolitical means of ideology’s articulation and communication. Geertz’ (1973) eloquent and noteworthy examination of the cultural significance of the Balinese cockfight indicates that no corner of society is immune from ideological construction. As he discovers in a simple social ritual a surprising means of ideological exchange in Balinese culture, he also describes a perfect demonstration of the kind of private distribution to which Gramsci and Althusser refer.

Beneath its external matrix of ownership, competition and speculation—the fifty-foot square ring, the spurs attached to the cock’s leg, the axial and peripheral bets—one witnesses in the Balinese cockfight cultural significance masquerading as competitive act. Geertz views the event as a microcosmic parallel of cultural order. It isn’t the cockfight itself that is primarily important. It is indeed the activity on which all eyes are glued, the focal point of the crowd’s vivid attention, but Geertz backgrounds it’s visceral drama completely to its cultural and social drama. Winning or losing, taking money or surrendering it, is merely a prop for cultural order. It performs for Balinese society the same function that the expressive arts of music, drama, painting do for other societies. Iconographies, fictions, competitions place before the individual a social commentary and request their consideration.

In that kind of representational universe, the cockfight is no different from other social practices and expressions. The act itself renders the everyday and ordinary into cultural relief, reduces things to their most basic appearance so that cultural meaning is more pronounced, its essence more clearly understood. To be more specific, Geertz claims that the “culture of a people is an ensemble of texts” (Geertz, 1973, p. 452), which is to say that social practice is more than mere wallpaper against which meaning may be randomly superimposed. Rather, it’s endowed with cultural meaning, always open to cultural analysis. The Balinese cockfight is for Geertz a cultural text, just one example of an occurrence housing embedded cultural meaning, shared beliefs and understandings. It is for
Balinese society a system of communication, defining in its structure a system of value and values, refreshing the cultural memory, seeking active acceptance by participants of the unified meanings it conveys in its structure.

Yet social practice is just one ideological text. Althusser (1971) notes as well the tremendous potential for the arts to petition the ideological consciousness. “What art makes us see,” he proclaims, “is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes . . .” (pp. 203–4). In contemporary societies, this system of representation has been especially linked to the development of the printed word. Written texts are, as Gouldner (1990) indicates in very semiotic fashion, particularly effective means for ideological communication, and he enlarges upon Althusser’s proclamations by envisioning a truly reciprocal process, something he calls a “two-step model of communication” in which complex ideologies are “transmitted . . . to mass audiences,” (and this is the important part) for their consideration (p. 307).

**Texts, Language and Signification**

Cronman (1980) notes that it’s one’s own “construing mind” that intersects with the “words, ideas, images and sounds of the text itself” (pp. 152, 155). Thus the act of reading, like the Balinese cockfight, may be viewed as a matter of engagement, a matter of “decoding what has by various means been encoded into the text” (Suleiman, 1980, pp. 7–8). Yet it’s important to note as well that what Suleiman’s really describing is an encounter between word signs and the individual consciousness. Decoding in reading depends upon a mutual process; word signs perform a dual function. They not only connect to broader systems of shared meaning, since for any language to be of use to a culture there must be a system of “interpretation on which everyone is likely to agree” (Eagleton, 1983, p. 86), they beckon as well the reader’s own contemplation, one’s personal system of beliefs, values and understandings. Thus more than simply a matter of decoding what’s been placed into the text, reception in this sense is the process of ideology meeting ideology within what Volosinov (1973) calls “interindividual territory” (p. 3), the self meeting the text’s own structure of values and points of view which then structures one’s reading of the text, the practical fulfillment of Gramsci’s hegemony.

The question is to what extent may such a careful and logical semiotic analysis be applied to television reception. Harvey (1978), drawing upon Marx and Engel’s *The German Ideology* (1974), poses to her reader the possibility that ideological communication isn’t confined to written texts alone, that hegemony may also operate via culture commodities like the mass media. Harvey’s work and that of others in this area depends upon the justification that literature and media reception are similar most basically in the way the receiver constructs textual meaning. Both processes require, as Livingstone indicates, “active choices . . . on the part of the viewer—knowledge of the genre, the programme, the world referred to in the text” (Livingstone, 1991, p. 300). On this point Mayne, in her observations on the nature of film texts and discourse, agrees. She supposes the impossibility of separating visual texts from ideology; “we are all complicitous to some extent,” she claims (see Mayne, 1995, p. 164). None of us es-
capes this act of decoding the film text as we witness it.

Barthes (1972) takes particular note of contemporary forms of communication, their unique requirement, like literature, for reciprocation on the part of the receiver to make sense of their significations. He notes, like Harvey, that signifying systems may be found not only in written texts, but also in arts like photography and painting, that each visual image stands before the viewer commensurate with its particular signification which always “presuppose[s] a signifying consciousness” on the part of the receiver (Barthes, 1972, p. 110), thus a two-step model like the one Gramsci proposes. By way of explanation, Barthes offers the example of a magazine photograph in which a black soldier dressed in a French armed services uniform stands in salute to the French flag. Beyond the photograph’s literal denotation, one perceives in the juxtaposition of the black soldier’s salute, the uniform and the French flag the pointed pacification of colonial criticism, the perception of a color-blind French nationalistic pride and fervor (p. 116). Yet the concepts perceived, Barthes claims, require this ideological pre-possession, one’s capacity to decipher the image’s ideological implications—the salute, the flag, the racial tension of French colonization.

Gouldner himself (1990), like Barthes, supposes a linear continuum from written texts through the “communications breakthrough[s] in the twentieth century,” which he regards as an even more widespread dissemination of information and hence ideology—considerations hardly separable from each other by Gouldner’s account—the development first of radio and subsequently cinema, and culminating presently in television. These constitute for him a more passive, though also more pervasive, kind of ideological distribution than social practice like cockfights and even the printed text (p. 307). Yet the electronic text essentially duplicates the kind of activity upon which the written text so generously depends. Gouldner specifically takes stock of television and the nature of the “mass experience,” and despite his pessimism respecting the “black box,” he nevertheless unavoidably takes into account its tremendous potential for the construction and consumption of ideology (pp. 307–308).

It’s possible even to justify this connection to ideology and the electronic text within a physiological context. Metallinos (1999) links the physiology of visual perception to the act of cognitive reception. Perception, he submits, is the process whereby one’s corporeal self is made aware of visual stimuli. Perception, is physical stimulation—the eye’s iris, rods and cones, the optic nerve, the visual cortex—while cognition is the process of making sense of those perceptions. In perception, visual media like video and film stimulate the “neurophysiological and biological activities of the eyes, ears, and brain;” while cognition constitutes a realm of activity “performed by the brain and the mind combined,” a means of translating the various visual stimuli in the television text into some kind of mental sense, some kind of mental concept that depends on the rich protean genesis of individual understandings (p. 433).

Another author places this same kind of multi-stage model in a familiar, though much argued, scholarly terrain. Smith (1994) suggests that reception is really a structure of identification occurring on “various levels of engagement” by the viewer (p. 34). He admits that
the “concept remains ill-defined,” and proposes to decipher just how it is that we ally ourselves to certain depicted moralities and ideologies exhibited within a given narrative while rejecting others. According to his structure of sympathy, viewers proceed through three individual stages of identification. The first simply a matter of recognition wherein characters and settings are perceived in a context of relative plausibility. The second a move to align ourselves with a given character’s point of view, and the third one’s adoption of allegiance whereby the viewer comes to rank the characters’ relative morality. This last stage is the culmination of cognition. Smith describes it as the point at which one makes moral judgements concerning the range of characters depicted and their actions, and the point as well in which we decide to either wholly accept or reject them and/or their actions (Smith, 1994, pp. 41–2).

The important point here is that the viewer in this final stage has proceeded beyond simple identification to what Smith calls “moral orientation” (Smith, 1994, p. 41). As one entertains a character’s relative morality and ideology, he or she also passes judgement on how consistent these are with one’s own moral anchor. Those actions and attitudes that are compatible with ideas already held, or those that are new and attractive but fail to disrupt ideological harmony—in other words, those that may be safely added to commonly held views—are then easy targets for allegiance.

Allegiance satisfies the view that television viewing is active rather than passive because it calls upon the individual to make cognitive and emotional decisions on the basis of character depiction. The viewer fashions his or her choices on the basis of a cognitive construct previously informed by one’s possession of, and consent to, principle values and beliefs held individually, but also represented commonly. By viewing the narrative depiction, each individual exercises his or her consent once again to morality and ideology that is most consistent with, or attractive to, these implicit views. Yet this is a choice after all. To argue the point is to reject any notion of engagement and position the viewer as merely a passive receptacle incapable of the cognitive decisions Smith suggests, an automaton without the capacity to feel or act independently.

Conclusion

On the surface, these may seem like a collection of disparate approaches to the phenomenon of reception. Yet at a fundamental level they are all similar because they envision the potential for activity, the opportunity for the viewer to engage the text in a rapport of meaning and signification which removes the television text from the monologic suppositions of quantitative/empirical methodologies alone.

Thus Gramsci’s project stages itself as a kind of paradigmatic explanation for textual reception. First, the text, whether printed word, film or television image, or even a cockfight, is anything but a monolithic determinant of meaning. Like the common world view, its language, sights and sounds don’t loom over the receiver coercing him or her into cultural submission. Rather, it submits to the receiver the critical possibility of accepting or rejecting the values and understandings embedded within as these are perceived in relation to the common world view which
the reader has come to internalize through a compromise equilibrium with other social groups. The text may be either supportive or oppositional to the common world view, or somewhere between each position along the ideological spectrum, but regardless of its relative location along that scale, all textual language always carries with it an ideological implication, therefore always requesting the reader’s critical consideration. By such a means the individual mixes with the collective and cultural exchange takes place.

This is a fine line, but it is also fundamentally a dynamic process since the act of receiving, measuring, qualifying, and, finally, accepting or rejecting holds forth the possibility of accommodation and the flexibility of the continually-evolving individual consciousness as it collides with the points of view manifested in the television text. It is correct to suggest a role for individuality in viewing like this but not as a final conduit that will always qualify universal and collective phenomena like television. Instead, individuality proceeds from an informed point, an autonomous consciousness undetermined, a will that finally fuses into a seamless consistency with the common world view accepted by the individual’s culture.

References


People’s Choice. (1997, February 5). *Broadcasting and Cable*, p. 64.


