A Re-evaluation of Literature in Active and Critical Audience Studies

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Introduction

The debate in audience studies between what are often termed 'active audience theory' or 'interpretive audience studies' and 'critical audience studies' generally reflects broader debates around structure and agency. At the centre of the discussion then are questions about the audience's power to actively read texts and make their own meanings from them and the structural and textual limits imposed upon this process. These various arguments vary between celebrations of textual polysemy and pessimistic prognoses of structural determination.[1] The debate is often a convoluted one, carried out on shifting grounds with complex and intertwining concepts. Depending on which literature is read, the same authors are portrayed as active audience proponents or critical media researchers.[2]

In this essay I will seek to chart a course through some of the literature of this debate, engaging with it in order to argue for a more careful evaluation of some audience research. This course will necessarily be based upon work seen as representative of certain theoretical arguments, taking general patterns into account rather than specific qualifications.[3] It will be proposed that critiques of the active audience approach, while in many instances helpful in guarding against romanticising the audience, also fail to

fully appreciate active audience studies and fall back on neo-Marxist conceptions of power and ideology. Some of the most vehement of these critiques judge interpretive audience studies based on models that active audience proponents often do not use, such as encoding/decoding.[4] While critical audience studies play an important role in (re) emphasising the textual and structural determinants of audience readings, their reliance on neo-Marxist models to explain these determinants impoverishes the way in which audiences can be theorised and understood.

Critiques of active audience theory: the text and its production

What are termed active audience studies are often ethnographically or at least qualitatively based studies of media reception, frequently based within the home or family unit.[5] They emphasise the way in which audiences use media to facilitate social interaction, the way in which audiences are able to resist and manipulate media messages and the way in which media is integrated into the everyday life of the audience. The active appropriation of media is at the forefront of these studies.[6]

Critiques of these active audience studies seek to re-acknowledge the power of the text and the producer in the communication process and to re-emphasise the restrictions to audience meaning- making imposed through the limits to polysemy.

There are several key themes running through critiques of active audience theory and interpretive audience studies. One such theme is based on the perceived focus on the consumption end of the communication process by active audience proponents. Critical media theorists contend that a lack of any real analysis of the production of the media text, or of the content of the text itself, in interpretative audience work has severely limited the range of possible restrictions on audience activity that can be uncovered in the research.

Kevin Carragee,[7] for example, raises the issue of the production process of media texts. He argues that media texts are cultural artefacts and economic commodities, the latter nature of the media text being ignored by interpretive analyses. Thus, the production work of news rooms, studied so well by researchers such as Gaye Tuchman and Michael Schudson is ignored.[8] The economic, political, structural and vocational way in which a text is formed and in which it is imbued with its ideological character is neglected in much active audience work, leaving the text as an autonomous cultural form, cut off from its point of production. This blind spot means that interpretive audience studies are unable to appreciate the "centralized sto-

rytelling institution" that restricts the degree to which audiences can negotiate the meanings of texts. [9]

In what is an articulate argument for an appreciation of both micro and macro forces in the process of media reception, Carragee proposes that interpretive communications research, like interpretive social science generally, fails to acknowledge the historical and material forces that restrict individual action. Noting the prevalence of phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and dramaturgy in active audience research, Carragee argues that interpretive studies ignore the structuring forces of the production of media messages, as well as their limiting textual properties. The embedded, contemporaneous nature of analyses of micro processes of inter-subjective interaction isolates the act of reception from the broader historical and social frame in which it occurs. [10]

Timothy Gibson also claims that there is a neglect of a properly theorised appreciation of the influence of political-economic structures on the moment of reception. The determining power of larger economic forces, including multi-national companies, and their structuring of the cultural field through production and distribution places audience activity into perspective. Viewers may negotiate the meaning of texts, but this cannot match the discursive power of Carragee's centralised storytelling institution. [11]

Cultural populism, say critical theorists, cannot take the constraints of economic and political forces upon audience meaning- making seriously. Thus, media audiences may actively resist and construct their own meanings from texts, but this work is always "set within and, in part, determined by their position within the shifting field of alliances, articulations, and historically produced structures". [12]

This artificial separation of audience members from their larger sociocultural surroundings is also lamented by David Miller and Greg Philo. These authors see in much active audience work the artificial placement of people into sealed spaces in which they are able to make their own meanings of texts. Miller and Philo's own work shows that people certainly are not cultural dopes, and can accept, reject or criticise the texts they are exposed to. However, they question the "assumption that texts can mean whatever audiences interpret them to mean – and that they only have meaning with each new interpretation". [13] The suggestion that audience's make their own meanings from texts implies, say Miller and Philo, that a text will mean "completely different things to different audiences". [14]

Miller and Philo propose that the audience does actively critique media texts in terms of whether or not they agree with its portrayal of an event. However, this is not a process of a free floating creation of meaning; rather, the text does have an influence:

> Our research did not show people effortlessly constructing the meaning of texts on the basis of pre-existing systems of thought. Some who were sympathetic to the miners were influenced negatively by media coverage, while some others who were politically conservative rejected the news coverage on violence.[15]

Audiences, then, do not create their own meanings of texts whilst sealed in their own conceptual space.

In a similar vein Budd et al critique what they see as the influence of American cultural studies and its over-estimation of the freedom of the audience. The work of researchers such as Lawrence Grossberg, John Fiske, as well as Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, and Ien Ang ignores the production process when analysing media reception.[16] The dominant American view that audiences habitually use the messages of the dominant media against itself as an empowering resource ignores the commoditisation of the audience highlighted in political economy studies of media.[17]

Budd et al argue that seeing the audience as commodity ensures a continued link between production and reception, and leads one to question the 'activity' of an audience which chooses from a prescribed and limited set of media choices, rarely leading to engagement with media "overtly designed to challenge dominant culture".[18] They propose that the separation of production and consumption in many ways ensures the discovery of audience activity as "whatever the message encoded, decoding comes to the rescue".[19]

Audience 'activity' and political activity

Perhaps more importantly for the politics of audience studies, for some, a focus on polysemy and audience autonomy and creativity cuts the possible links between the audience and a larger political project. Critics of the active audience theory ask how much it matters if a housewife is able to make fun of sexist television products if she is unable to link this attitude to a wider political project in which the patriarchal structures of society are challenged. Far too often the notion of an active audience is taken to also mean a politically motivated audience, one resistant to the ideological powers of society.

Thus, Gibson, drawing on Freidric Jameson, critiques the 'populist' approach to cultural and media studies for being unable to contribute to a form of socialist politics.[20] Citing work such as that of Janice Radway, Fiske and Ang, he questions the ability of audiences to subvert texts to their own ideological needs.[21] As Gibson correctly points out, many scholars have shown that active viewing does not necessarily constitute a form of political

resistance. For Gibson, to read a dominant text actively is to maintain a sort of resistance after the fact of subordination. Without links to alternative points of social organizationorganisation and political movements, active audience readings can never be truly politically resistant or active.[22]

Here the domestic focus of much ethnographic audience work can be seen. For critical researchers an increased focus on the micro consumption of the home has meant a lack of sociological analyses of the "macro-structures of media and society".[23] A retreat from the public sphere and into the domestic space of culture cannot, even with creative reception of media within the home, be taken as constituting a form of political activity. There must be an appreciation of the way in which the domestic consumer remains isolated from possibilities of real structural change in society at large.[24]

Similarly, other authors go on to criticizecriticise writers such as Fiske, Lull and Mike Featherstone for their over-enthusiastic view of popular culture as "'by definition'" resistance to domination. In taking pleasure in the consumption of popular culture to signal resistance rather than incorporation into a capitalist structure, Fiske and Featherstone endorse a view of a post-modern cultural realm wherein centrifugal forces and hierarchical orders are missing.[25]

For critical theorists, this over-enthusiastic view stems from the methodological restrictions of an approach which is constantly looking for the uses of media. In focusing on the uses of mass media, then, researchers such as James Lull conclude that media are in effect an empowering resource. Miller and Philo question this view of popular culture as a form of resistance to dominance, asking if the far right also use it in this way, and if so, if it then remains 'resistant' in the way proposed by active audience scholars.[26]

For several audience researchers, authors such as Lull, Fiske and Featherstone "confuse the culture of the people with the products provided by capitalist corporations".[27] The celebration of cultural use turns trivial instances of active media reception into something symbolic of more meaningful resistances to a hegemonic system.

Similarly, Mike Budd, Robert Entman and Clay Steinman critique what they see as the isolation of U.S. cultural studies from politics. Active audience studies neglect any project of addressing through research social inequalities that are reinforced in the mass media. The confusion of occasional sub-cultural media use with wholesale political activity makes writing which aims to organizeorganise readers in their ability to critique social inequalities redundant.[28] Drawing on Christopher Lasch, Budd at al state that at a time "when the 'moral bottom has dropped out of our culture'… works that

link the theoretical to the political and ethical, that nurture such values as democracy and equality through their critical analyses of cultural processes and products" are what are needed.[29] For Budd et al then, actively reading a television show and deriving pleasure from it does not constitute the important political activism that is needed in this time of cultural malaise.

In essence, then, the argument proposed by critical media theorists is that active audience theory or interpretive audience studies weaken the link between the audience and the structural and textual determinants of meaning. They take any sort of activity as constituting a meaningful resistance to ideological hegemony and ignore all other stages in the life of the media product other than reception. Also, they fail to realistically reflect on the lack of a connection between domestic viewing activity and larger social movements aimed at breaking down power structures of society. Active audience theory has travelled dangerously close to losing sight of the underlying sociological influences and structures which make them-selves felt in often opaque ways in the process of media reception.

The related focus on the audience as consumers (rather than political subjects) playfully drawing pleasure from the text risks losing sight of the vital relationship between mass communication and citizenship. The job of the scholar should remain that of critical observer and researcher, particularly in conditions of increasing deregulation, privatisation and monopolisation of mass media resources. Philo and Miller even go so far as to claim that in looking at relational reception and everyday uses of media "Academics have become industry groupies" and that a focus on the "social relations of media consumption" could be reduced to "asking if people listen to the radio whilst doing the ironing".[30]

I will now engage with these issues in an attempt not to propose a romantic autonomy of the audience, nor to shrug ofoff determinants of audience meaning- making all together, but rather to re-think the way in which these determinants are seen and to thus re-evaluate some of the active audience literature critiqued above.

A re-evaluation of critical media studies

In proposing an increased recognition of structural and textual determinants upon media reception, critical theorists often use concepts heavily implicated in a neo-Marxist media studies. There is an emphasis on the over-determining macro structures of society in which audience activity in the form of resistance can take place. This view instigates a reduction of the possibilities of media reception to the activity of an agent within structural determinants "'not of their own making'". Agency then becomes reac-

tion, resistance to a subordinating "'system'" or 'ideology'."ideology". In an attempt to balance the micro and macro, agency and structure, the use of a Marxist based structure prioritises a homogenizedhomogenised macro over any micro processes. The two are seen only as linked when the agent struggles against, always only to a certain limit, the ideological system.

Researchers are correct in arguing that there are both structural and textual determinants on viewer's reading of texts. However, in looking at studies such as Liebes and Katz and Ang through a neo-Marxist theoretical lens, I feel critical theorists often overlook the way these authors have actually emphasised this point.[31] Rather than ignoring limits on individual media consumption, there has been in some work an attempt to move beyond the categories of class, race and gender, while in other work these categories are re-conceptualised in terms of interpretive communities based on gender position or cultural background.

For example, the Russian Jews interrogated in Liebes and Katz's study of the reception of the popular TV show *Dallas* approached the text not as free floating agents, but as citizens informed by a background of Russian literature and distrust of western cultural forms. As well as this, Liebes and Katz warn against an ignorance of the textual limits on audience readings. Rather, the text as a popular American product and the cultural, social and linguistic background of the audience members works in complex ways when watching Dallas. These forms of influence over meaning - making are both enabling and restrictive and meaning comes from the meeting of the text and the audience. This work sits in a position between the macro and micro, containing both the active work of audiences in making *Dallas* their own as well as the larger forces of gender and politics which go into the readings of a Russian group of husbands and wives.[32]

Similarly, Lull also acknowledges technical and ideological limits on audience activity. These limits do not occupy the central, determining position as in the critical work sited above. Additionally, they are not limits set in a relatively stable realm of the political economy of media production. Rather, these limits are more fluid, again enabling and limiting, and are uncovered through careful ethnographic work into the everyday complexities of media reception.[33]

These sorts of limiting and enabling elements are overlooked in critiques of active audience studies due in part to the problematic use of the encoding/decoding model to understand both textual power and the work of interpretive researchers.

Studies such as those of Liebes and Katz and Lull do not use the encoding/decoding model. Rather, they propose various other modes of restriction and facilitation that inform the reception process, from linguistic

and cultural communities to the family unit as a '"natural audience"'. This would not be a problem for critical theorists if the encoding/decoding model had been universally accepted as an effective model for understanding audiences. However, the model has several problems acknowledged by Stuart Hall himself, and it has not enjoyed as much popularity in research outside of Europe as it did within.

This problem of judgement applies whether one is critiquing active audience work for using certain versions of encoding/decoding, such as Miller and Philo do, or for focusing only on the decoding end of the model.[34] To continually employ the concepts and ideas from a model which restricts audience activity to incorporation or resistance to dominant hegemony when critiquing an audience ethnography which seeks to expand beyond these confines is problematic. The model itself has largely had the status of a canonical text thrust upon it and is too easily taken as a defence of a certain mode of critical media studies.[35]

Additionally, the text as encoded in a single way and the assertion of a centralizedcentralised storytelling institution is problematic, raising the spectre of a centralised, homogeneous and deliberative media production centre.[36] The encoding/decoding model is perhaps more effective in analysing the broadcast news which was the centre of much of the model's critiques during the political and cultural activism against Thatcherism in 1980s Britain.

The use of this model and the worthy proposal that the text and structures of production be taken into account raises issues not yet sufficiently thought through in critical (or, for that matter, interpretive) media studies. For example, there exists a problem in linking the reading of a text arrived at after careful academic scrutiny with that arrived at by audiences. I am not saying that this project should be abandoned altogether, but issues of how researchers should see the text, how its true nature can be arrived at, is what motivated much audience research in the first place. While the structural and vocational influences on the news text should be acknowledged, the way in which this should be linked with the audience through the conduit of the text is insufficiently theorised in critical research.

The danger is in slipping back to analyses which read a text as having certain ideological messages and then seeing those messages as the determining factor in audience readings. Again, the encoding/decoding model, with its limitation of audience response to that of resistance to, negotiation or acceptance of a single preferred message which the researcher arrives at is of limited use here. What does it mean to an audience if a researcher finds that the political persuasion of the owner of a newspaper is influencing the content of that paper? The danger is in emphasising too much what

it *should* mean rather than what it does.

It is not argued here that there exists a form of complete audience autonomy, this is a fallacy not often argued in active audience research, and perhaps the all too often use of John Fiske as a whipping boy for critical researchers is a sign of this. My point is that the use of the encoding/decoding model and neo-Marxist notions of pre-determining structures restricts the sort of analysis that can be yielded in audience research. The prevalence of this model in the critical literature is signalled in its application to all interpretive research on audiences, regardless of whether or not that research actually uses the model: "Interpretive studies frequently have described audience decodings without tracing possible links between these decodings and broader social categories".[37]

Linking active consumption with active politics

A second major concern for critical theorists is the lack of a connection between interpretive "'decodings'" and broader social categories exemplified by a lack of connection between interpretive ethnography and a larger political project.[38] Hence, some critical theorists lament that the domestication of audience research has led to a retreat from the realm of politics and power.[39] It has come down, to paraphrase Philo and Miller, to studying whether someone does the ironing while listening to the radio.

It is difficult, in the first instance, to trace the possible connections between domestic media use and larger political movements of an emancipatory kind, both methodologically and theoretically. It would require a tracing of political behaviour through a direct line from media consumption to social action. This is made even more difficult by the lack of any solid definition in the critical media literature (as far as I can ascertain) of what this larger political project is, other than the vague notion of a socialist politics, or the promotion of certain values the researcher supports.

Additionally, any critique of the domestic turn in audience studies as lacking political import surely under-estimates the contribution of feminist scholarship in this area, particularly through the 1970s and 80s.[40] As Charlotte Brunsdon puts it when commenting on the movement to make the "'personal political'":

> If the personal is political, if it is in the home, in relationships, in families, that women's intimate oppression –- or the oppression of women as women –- is most consensually secured, then the media construction and representation of personal life becomes fascinating and an urgent object of study. If the traditional leftist critique of the media, with its structuring sense of class conflict, was drawn to the

reporting of the public world –- to industrial disputes, to the interactions of state and broadcasting institutions, to international patterns of ownership and control – the emerging feminist scholarship had quiet another focus.[41]

To be sure, Brunsdon is talking about the period of the 1970s into the 1980s, and much has changed in all forms of media and audience research since then. However, what can be taken from the quote is still important; that to ignore the everyday domestic nature of media consumption, in all its activity and creativity, is to ignore an important political realm. It presents the danger of again artificially separating the domestic space as one of consumption and leisure, free from politics and power, from the social space as that of the important masculine realm of work and politics.

David Morley, in his highly informative essay on audience theory, takes a similar line in critiquing John Corner who laments a focus on the micro-processes of viewing which has displaced any engagement with macro structures of society. For Morley this is problematic, as Corner "implicitly equates the macro with the real and the micro with the realm of the epiphenomenon (if not the inconsequential)".[42] This view ignores, Morley continues, the gendered way in which the micro and macro have been divided, and the work which has critiqued this division and displayed the importance of the political nature of the domestic everyday.

Interestingly, Morley also critiques Corner for conceptualising the macro as a pre-given structure, rather than one which can only be reproduced through micro processes (he calls on Anthony Giddens' "'structuration'" in this instance).

In a similar fashion, other writing on this matter tends to take the macro as pre-given and instantly over-determining.[43] This approach allows a keen appreciation of the macro political and social factors in media reception, but excludes any understanding of the mutual construction and reconstruction of these structures in the situated realm of reception, other than in the form of resistance to a pre-given configuration.

A theoretical locus of the active-critical debate

Lying behind the approaches to audiences outlined above are contrasting attitudes towards cultural studies in general, including divergences in attitudes towards the subject and identity within historical and social structures and the role of mediated communication in social life. The nomadic subjects of Fiske's analyses, seen by some as agents who roam the fields of cultural symbols, grazing on them as they wish in order to fulfil certain desires in an unfettered fashion, are a point of contention for critical

media researchers.[44] Indeed, the de-centred subject is seen by Bud et al as unable to organizeorganise for political action, turning the free nomad of Fiske's writing into a powerless and baseless subject dependant on larger more organizedorganised political forces.

In their article critiquing active audience theory, Miller and Philo take issue with the ideas of the post modern subject they see as lying behind much recent cultural theory. This new work emphasises the role of people in the construction of their identities, which rather than being determined by socio economic factors are pieced together by active agents. These identities are seen, according to Miller and Philo, as being textual in nature, shifting modes through which different discourses speak. Thus, they critique the work of Judith Butler on gender, stating that her assertion that sexual difference is socially constructed "strains belief".[45] History, in all its material and socio-economic reality is not an ethereal resource to invent new traditions and new identities, it rather provides "the real material circumstances in which identities are produced and project towards the future".[46]

Miller and Philo are correct to point out that identity is not the fractured, free- flowing project proposed in post modern theory. However, I would again question the extent to which active audience work such as that of Lull and Liebes and Katz actually propose this sort of subjectivity. While these authors do find in their work an active audience, one that can make and re- make identities based on media symbols and collective communication, they do not discard restraints all together. Miller and Philo, when discussing the post modern approach to the subject, critique it for slipping into a "cultural and epistemological relativism and therefore suffer[ing] from an inability to analyse or discuss the material and historical circumstances in which identities are forged".[47] My point is that much of the most important active audience research and theory does not do this, and that, in reference to Butler, a focus on the performance of social roles emphasises the mutual if unequal construction and performative nature of identities that occurs in the vast social area between political economy and audience reception, an area often ignored with too much focus on the macro and political.

For example, John Thompson's social theory of media sees people as both increasingly relying on, and increasingly creatively using media symbols and signs in their everyday lives.[48] Lull, Liebes and Katz and Radway also see media as something which is used within the enabling and restrictive environment of communicative surroundings. People talk to each other and work through texts in everyday talk, in this way, their interpretations are restricted by the nature of this talk and the wider political, historical and social contexts in which it occurs.[49]

While the critical warning against post modern relativism is commendable, the way in which this is addressed impoverishes the way audiences can be seen.[50] Thus, although critical theorists appropriately bring in the realities of experience in the formation of identities and media reception, pointing to the effects of "'real'" social processes, these are not thought through in ways other than pre- determined material structures of political economy. Thus, there is little if any talk in critical media studies of the mutual yet asymmetrical construction of these social, cultural and material forces.

Additionally, Miller and Philo's contention that language does not create new experiences seems to exclude the possibility of language as a constitutive force, and thus of media as a constitutive force in the construction and understanding of new environments and relationships, and thus new experiences. The mutual construction of environments of media experience needs to be acknowledged, where forms of memory, identity and emotion are neither completely imposed from above nor constructed from below. The audience member is always structured in a field much wider and perhaps more meaningful than the text and its production process. This field is formed, maintained and altered in a complex process involving social actors and institutions. This mutually formed context of media engagement is both restrictive and facilitative, often with little clear demarcation between the two. As Thompson puts it:

> "Of course, individuals who engage in interaction, whether mediated or face-to-face, are always drawing on skills and accumulated resources of various kinds. Their action is always part of a structured field of interaction which both creates and limits the range of opportunities available to them."[51]

Thus, this individual work through media is always structured and relative, always constituted in webs of cultural significance and new media environments. The agent is always an actor with some freedom, but they always act within social contexts which at different levels and to different degrees they play a part themselves in maintaining or challenging.

The unpredictability of meaning-making factors between the text and the audience must be looked at to avoid the attribution of a determining status to either text or actor as separate, conflicting entities. This is not to discount studies which have found a correlation between certain amounts of exposure to certain media and a level of misinformation on social issues. Rather, it seeks to extend on the explanation for this, moving beyond just looking at the media/audience duality to a mutually constructed cultural context of action and understanding. This is to travel beyond the problem-

atic notion of causality towards a more interpretative discussion of the pos-
sible forms through which certain opinions or views have been built, main-
tained or even transformed.

Conclusion

In this paper I have re-evaluated recent literature which has called for
a return to a more critical audience studies and a stronger focus on struc-
tural determinants of audience activity. These critiques of what is often
called active audience studies are often based on a miss reading of that
work, the application of inappropriate frameworks of evaluation and a lack
of any acknowledgement of the way in which work on the active audience
has pointed to various structural and textual influences. Calls for a return to
more critical audience studies risk prioritising macro structures of political
economy over subjective meaning- making. The risk here is the polarisation
of the audience and textual production processes in a time of media com-
plexity wherein storytelling is no longer necessarily centralised.

What the above re-thinking of active and critical audience studies
would mean for an audience research project involves a different perspec-
tive being taken toward wider social structures and categories. There is in-
deed common ground between the approaches, as both seek to under-
stand media reception within wider contexts. The difference is in how these
contexts are seen. On a theoretical level, an approach guided by the above
re-evaluation would entail a shift away from Marxist social theory to ap-
proaches which view social structure and media production as something
other than determining forces that are established at an institutional level.
Far from ignoring wider factors that influence how an audience approaches
and engages with media, an active audience study widens the net of the
possible factors which could influence audience reception. This includes
culture in its widest definition as a mutually but unequally constructed and
fluid phenomenon, rather than simply an off shoot of capitalist corporate
culture.

A study of media audiences would thus begin by seeing these influen-
tial factors as not simply restrictive and enforced from the top down, but as
possibly enabling and reassuring. As David Morley has argued, the macro
structures that are the focus of political economy can no longer be seen as
homogeneous monoliths enforced from on high. Media consumption is
about more than politics and power, and it occurs in a social world where-in
people are structured and structuring agents in a variety of complex and
overlapping social and cultural settings.

In methodological terms, this means approaching media as a part of

everyday life and media consumption as a social and cultural practice. Audiences are always involved in forming the contexts in which they receive and use media and active audience research would involve investigation of the role of social actors in the constitution of these restricting and reassuring structures. This allows a view of the power of media texts and institutions as it is expressed and makes itself felt in the actions and practices of the audience, rather than assuming the form and extent of this power. This is the difference between a cultural studies which seeks to understand the behaviour of people and one which ascribes their behaviour a certain meaning, concluding that some media reception is trivial as it does not visibly connect to a certain political project.

This type of audience study requires an approach with as few preconceived notions of influence and power as possible, allowing the audience itself to guide the researcher to the various complex and overlapping ways in which media makes itself felt in the lives of its receivers. The way in which media impacts on the lives of audiences, then, would be about more than political persuasion or misinformation. A researcher would also be open to the extent to which and ways in which audiences can and do use media to construct their own cultural and social worlds, the type of worlds that are constructed and the types of social relations, attitudes and practices that make up those worlds.

Thus, the behaviour of an audience, for example a family, would be read not simply in terms of resistance to or incorporation into dominant ideological systems, but in terms of how a household culture is constructed with media and how this links to wider social structures. This includes gender roles, forms of talk, values and attitudes and practices and behaviours which would be approached not as linearly connected to media exposure, but as occurring in a social and cultural world of which media are a large part.

While I have somewhat artificially divided active and critical here, by necessity simplifying a diverse range of diverse literature, the two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. As has been argued above, the ethnographic turn in audience studies – one grounded in the richness of everyday life – is able to explicate some of the determinants on media reading and uncover the way in which media may help shape its audience. In constantly relying on the same models of neo-Marxist critique, however, the range of this research in some critical researchcases is restricted. Lost in the dichotomy between macro-Marxist structures and utopian textual freedom that characterises so much of the debate on audiences is the actual work of recipients as socializedsocialised agents. The idea that engaging with media does not have to be reduced to questions of

incorporation into a monolithic system or resistance to that system is largely left out in many debates on the audience.

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NOTES

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22 Gibson, "Beyond Cultural Populism".

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