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CRITICAL/CULTURAL STUDIES: NEW PARADIGM FOR MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

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Introduction

The past two decades have seen a major transformation in media studies through critical/ cultural approaches which have affected not only media research but also studies in literature, art, history, culture and the humanities. We have crossed an intellectual watershed and cannot go back. This paper will trace the development of ideas and theories that make up this radical shift in Western thinking. It will be a challenge. The material is complex (often more complex than it needs to be). So let us consider this labyrinth of critical/cultural theories that have so radically altered ways of perceiving the media and the world.

These critical/cultural theories are not just another step in scholarship but rather a radical shift in our way of understanding and investigating. They represent a major paradigm shift in the sense used by Thomas Kuhn when he posited that science and knowledge do not develop through steady, continuous progression, but rather by sudden shifts, by leaps into completely new ways of understanding and perceiving. A paradigm shift does not come easily; it is resisted by traditional perspectives and only after some struggle does it finally supersede the old model. This is what has happened with film studies and is now happening with television research. In fact, the critical/cultural model has challenged traditional ideas of history, literature, art, aesthetics, culture, society, humanism and social science. It has shaken the way we perceive our world and may even mark the start of a new epoch in civilisation (the fourth era in Western civilisation according to Foucault).

Critical/cultural theory first impacted film studies (in the U.S) sometime around the late 1960s. Film had already achieved status as an art form due in part to the rise of television as the primary mass culture medium. In a very short time, a multitude of film courses and

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programs sprang up in US colleges and universities. Numerous new film journals appreared in the market. The break from the past was sudden and complete.

Background of Critical/Cultural Theory

What then makes up this new critical/cultural model? The answer is wide-ranging and applies diversely to film and television. We will begin by reviewing earlier media studies which roughly are organized around AESTHETIC, SOCIAL SCIENCE and CULTURE areas. These are the aesthetic concerns of judgements and questions of quality, meaning and pleasure; social science research and questions of effects, functions and the way media impacts society; cultural studies and others which devoted their primary concern to the impact of popular mass culture. To risk a generalization, the past two decades have seen a move in aesthetics i.e. from quality judgements to questions of meaning to textual analysis to the experience of the reader/viewer. Social issues have moved from their concern with direct effects to more subtle ideological, hegemonic and discourse analyses. Cultural studies shifted from fears of debasement by mass culture to a media-identified post modernism. We will begin by tracing these progressions up to the arrival of critical/cultural studies.

The aesthetic thrust in film was concerned with its claim as being an art form the eight art relating its formal qualities to its aesthetic effects. How did various film production practices affect aesthetic response? How did a quality film differ from a trash product? What was the nature of film? Russian theorists Eisenstein and Pudovkin for example, differing presented differing theories of montage. Bazin challenged this manipulative approach with his urge to let the spectator discover meaning in a scene characterized by the long take, composition in depth, and concern with mise-en-scene. Kracauer and other realists argued with Arnheim and the formalists over the nature of film. This was film theory until the 1960s. There was little television aesthetic theory.

The concerns of social science were about what the media was doing to us, to our children, to society. (Specialised research into advertising effectiveness and audience analysis to increase program popularity are not of interest to this paper.) From the late 1920s onwards, social science research refined its research methods through increased statistical and methodological sophistication; Lazarsfeld, Lasswell, Hovland and Blumer helped bring communication research to its desired level of respectability. Typically the 1930s Payne Fund studies in the US were an early large scale attempt to discover the effects of motion pictures on youth as an answer to concerns that movies would lead to delinquency, crime, and debauchery.

In the 1930s in Europe, the Frankfurt School brought a broader Marxist social analysis to questions of the ideological power of media as a means of social control by the dominant elite. As Fascism took over Germany, many of these scholars came to America. World War II raised issues of the effect of war propaganda, and the power of the media to persuade became a ripening area for research.

The 1960s saw laboratory studies on the effects of media violence and sexual portrayals. The U.S. Surgeon General's Report concluded that media violence could have socially dysfunctional effects for some individuals. But media effects are difficult to prove. There are too many mediating variables. Laboratory studies do not translate easily to real social situations. Media researchers tried a new approach to discover how viewers actually used television (called the uses and gratifications approach) but this has not proven theoretically or pragmatically useful.

Moreover, social science media research was being challenged—and not only by critical/cultural scholars—for a number of reasons. Rigorous "scientific" methods such as those used in the physical sciences are not so applicable when dealing with people. There are problems of trust between respondent and the researcher. The bias of this research is away from meaning and toward function; questions of meaning or values are rarely raised and cannot be adequately approached. The use of artificial and fictitive predetermined categories with their attending presumptions slant researcher interpretations. Interpretations are always made from the point of view of the researcher and not that of the respondent. It is untenable to assume that survey items and categories have a similar meaning for all respondents. Similarly untenable is the assumption that responses represent the respondents' experience. Can our complex, interactional responses to actual television programs largely viewed in domestic situations really be contained or understood in the laboratory, or from interview questions? What is missed is the life experience of the respondent or viewers.

Another questionable assumption is that there exist objective attributes which transcend individuals; in reality, objectivity is an illusion. Scientific research is never value free. Too often we accept a superstitious belief in scientism and do not question its assumptions and philosophical biases. Science is an ideology which supports a particular system of understanding and inquiry which has political implications. For these and other reasons, the scientific method, especially as applied to social and behavioural media research, has been seriously questioned.

One response to this has been the development of ethnological approaches where investigators explore issues in depth with respondents, sometimes actually living with families for extended periods to explore how they interact with the media. While ethnological "qualitative" research overlaps aspects of critical/cultural studies, there are differences between the two approaches; they may share doubts about traditional social science research, but too few ethnologists are aware of critical/cultural perspectives.

The mass culture versus high culture argument was popular during this period. In the 1930s, the Frankfurt School expressed concern over mass art debasing "high art." This issue again became cogent in the 1950s after television became the quintessential mass culture form. Critics considered the implications of highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow culture. The popular arts were characterized as being mass produced, escapist, formulaic, sensationalistic, trivial, obsessed with fashion, novelty and the cult of personality, having little sense of tradition, exploiting emotional responses, appealing to the commonplace mind, offering pre-fabricated experience without challenge, making the audience passive consumers (the narcotising dysfunction effect), destroying folk art and threatening fine art. Popular art was seen as a threat to our cultural heritage.

Some critical approaches in the 1960s seem like transitions into critical/cultural theory. The auteur theory was first proposed by Francois Truffaut and critics in the French *Cahiers du Cinema* magazine and then championed in America by Andrew Sarri. They defined the film director as a new and completely different kind of artist, a new type of author. Looking largely at American directors working in the Hollywood system, they identified the unique artistic personality that could be found within what were sometimes lesser studio products. It was not a question of good or bad films but of good or bad directors. And only certain directors—those with unique signatures—qualified, although there was not always agreement on who this meant. Favourites were Renoir, Hitchcock, Chaplin, Ford, Welles, Dreyer, Hawks, Ray. The theory declined due to its narrow focus (film is strongly a collaborative

practice) and the "death of the author" claims of later critical theory.

Genre criticism has been more persistent. Certain films and television programs held together around various commonalities—of style, subject matter, themes, motifs, character types, plot patterns, or iconography. We have westerns, situation comedies, science fiction, horror, hard-boiled detective, and film noir. These are useful concepts; the industry uses them to easily identify products, audiences develop expectations around them. Critics have traced the development of certain genres from their beginnings through archetypal forms into later self-reflections and self-parody. However genre characteristics are often imprecise. For instance was *M.A.S.H* a situation comedy? Recently genre criticism has been attacked as being just another master code imposed on the media.

Culture critic Marshall McLuhan, a sort of transitional figure of the 1960s and 1970s, challenged the public to become aware of how much lives are being changed by the media— "the medium is the message." Today we have seen a revival of his thought.

Contemporary critical/cultural studies

Moving now to critical/cultural studies, it is hereby stressed that they present a radical perspective challenging traditional ways of thinking. Meaning is problematised because words arbitrarily refer to each other within the language system rather than to a referent. Also problematised are concepts like society, our individualised selves, even reality itself. We assume they are given, natural, the way things are, while actually they are social constructions. The implications of these challenges are far reaching.

Semiotics

Critical/cultural studies sprang from semiotic and structural work of Europe. Semiotics (also referred to as semiology) is a theoretical approach concerned with the study of signs, of meaning or signification and its production; of the signifier (a physical perceived form such as a word or image) and the signified (the mental concept linked to it), the codes which direct us how to interpret these, and the text in which they appear. (Text is a useful term since it includes the idea of a site for the struggle for meaning. Within analysis, a film that is viewed is referred to as a text that is read, underscoring its problematic signifying structure to be analysed). Key names here include Peirce, de Saussure, Metz, Eco, Barthes and Derrida.

Semiotics stresses that language is arbitrary and conventional. Words have no meaning in themselves. They have no natural referent in an outside reality. Meaning comes from the interrelation between words in the language system. Our interpretation of linguistic and non-linguistic signs is mediated by social codes. These codes are conventions of representation. It is through representation that we postulate and construct our world.

Christian Metz applied semiotics to determine how film can be analysed as language and whether there is a unique film language. The project generated scholarly activity in the late 1960s and early 1970s but quickly faded when it reacheda dead end. No simple correspondence was found between filmic and linguistic elements. The five classes of codes that Roland Barthes identified operating in literature are still used by critics to trace the construction of meaning in media segments.

The legacy of semiotics is in large part a shift from *what* a film or television program means to *how* it means, especially how this meaning is socially produced.

Structuralism

Structuralism is a related strand of cultural analysis. It is of one system, of a world of relationships rather than a world of things, of structures which form our being and our reality. Language is seen not so much as a structure from which we speak but a structure which speaks us. The forms are already there; we are born into a language system and are formed in and through this language. With this view, Man has been decentered, he is no longer autonomous and independent of the humanistic world.

A central concept is the identification of deep structures that generate meanings. Freud and Marx are structuralists since the former identified the operations of the unconscious lurking beneath our everyday behaviour and Marx posited economics and the class struggle as the central force underlying history. Levi-Strauss is a name linked with structuralism. He hoped his anthropological investigations would identify deep structures in societies that would reflect the structures of the mind and thereby reveal how mind is constituted. Unfortunately this project did not succeed; structuralism as a unitary enterprise declined while many of its tenets continue in critical/cultural theory.

Levi-Strauss identified binary oppositions—raw/cooked, hot/cold, edible/inedible, native/foreign—as central to many cultures and their myths. In the early 1970s, media analyst such as Peter Wollen used this in identifying binary oppositions such as wilderness/garden, gun/book, east/west as deep structures in John Ford westerns. Will Wright's deep structure analyses of the development of the western movie and its myth as paralleling the historical development of modern capitalism. This direct use of early structuralism has fallen into disrepute even as broader structuralist concepts such as stress on relationships and system continue to inform textual theory and post structuralism.

Narrative Analysis

Modern narrative analysis is concerned with analysing stories and their narrative patterns. It traces from the Russian Formalists of the 1920s who considered such matters as the distinction between story and plot, narrator position, point of view. Vladimir Propp analysed Russian folk tales to discern the basic narrative patterns common to them. Propp's schema is still referred to although it does not so easily translate to film and television stories. Today's narrative analysis is frequently involved with exploring how readers, texts and authors are related as well as constructed.

At first textual analysis concentrated on how texts contained or elicited meaning, with their use of signs—signifiers and signifieds—with codes of interpretation, with denotative and connotative meanings, and with how meaning was manipulated to make the cultural and the constructed seem natural. Derrida and the DECONSTRUCTIONISTS went on to problematise the sign and its signified, rejecting the notion of ultimate fixed meaning. They prefer to stress the free play of signifiers that continually slide into one another, never coming to a point of closure on any fixed and final meaning (much as like looking up a word in the dictionary that leads to another word, another and so forth). The broader implication of this position is to deny the existence of a transcendental signifier which gives meaning to all others and a transcendental signified as a meaning toward which all signs point; in Western thought candidates for such meanings have been God, the Idea, the Self, the Cosmic Spirit or, on a lesser level, such concepts as freedom, democracy, authority, and the family. Decon-

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structing such first principles reveal them to be the result of a social ideology rather than an outside support for it.

Texts are now seen as intertextual. Each text is interwoven with other texts. Any single text is a combination of several texts. This includes the notion of the author as a text rather than as the unique origin of textual meaning. The writer, director or producer is simply an input of a particular text, one more in a confluence of intertextuality. Thus we can speak of the "death of the author" as a strand within critical/cultural theory.

Discourses

Discourse theory is a recent development in the analysis of meaning. The stress of semiotics and structuralism that made meaning the product of language and referring to itself rather than an outside reality referent. The product of individual consciousness suggests that words can mean anything. The idea of discourses modifies this, recognizing the existence of many social meanings originating as acts from specific "speakers", It is not so much that we learn language as it is that we learn established discourses which express or represent particular perspectives such as those of race, class, gender, age, family. Discourses are structured, interrelated, and reflect ideological power relations. While not themselves textual, discourses can be traced in texts. Discourses construct a sense of our social identity as we speak of them.

Reader-oriented analysis

Still another recent thrust in critical/cultural studies of meaning is reader oriented analysis, a move away from the text as the primary site of meaning to the role of the reader/viewer in constructing meaning. For meaning is in large part created in the act of reading by a reader who is actively involved in the process. By bringing to the reading process their background, knowledge and perspective, the reader is a producer of meaning and pleasure. Some critics maintain the reader is a producer of texts, that the text is incomplete, not fully present, until it is realized in the process of reading. This helps account for the reader's (or television viewer's) pleasure by participating in the production of meaning. Reader-oriented approaches, often called reader response criticism or reception theory, are found in the work of Iser and Jauss Ingarden, Fish, Holland and Culler.

Much of this reader-response work uses phenomenological approaches that are concerned with how the reader defines and interprets meanings with the text. The meaning comes from the performance of the text as constructed by the individual reader; reading is a dynamic interaction between the reader's expectations and the text's instructions for meaning production.

While it is true that each text contains within it suggestions, as to how it should be read or experienced, early textual analysis implied that readers were held captive by the ideological position created for them by the text. Stuart Hall modified this by pointing out that while there is a preferred reading position, there are also possible readings that are contrary to this, and that most readings are actually negotiated between the text and the reader.

This "return of the reader" is a useful development although we must recognise that the notion of "reader" is a problematic one as we will see in the post structuralist theory of the subject. First let us consider a major force in post sructuralism psychoanalytic theory.

Post-Structuralism Psychoanalysis

Critical/Cultural theory turned to Freud for a systematic explanation of how we derive meaning and pleasure. Freud claimed that our behavior and understanding stem in part from unconscious repressions, mechanisms and desires. Psychoanalysis as a system offering explanations for these seem uniquely apt for the cinema experience. Film viewing takes place in a darkened auditorium; our critical faculties are more relaxed; we may well be close to the dream state where the unconscious operates more freely. One explanation of our pleasure in viewing films in this situation is found in Freudian notions of scopophilia, voyeurism and fetishism such pleasures of looking and gazing are grounded in part in our sexual drives. Cinema exploits these pleasures as we identify our gaze with the camera and with the looks of characters on screen with whom we identify. If the cinema viewing situation does indeed elicit voyeuristic and fetishistic responses, then our source of pleasure with these can be located deep within our libidinal unconscious.

The modifications to psychoanalytic theory by Jacques Lacan have contributed greatly to critical film theory. Lacan drew on semiotic theory to identify the central role of language in the child's early socialisation process and acquisition of conciousness. He claims the unconscious is structured like a language. He identifies a mirror phase when the infant first realises that it is a complete unified whole in a world of other separate beings. (For example by looking at itself or its mother as reflected in a mirror). Before this, the child did not comprehend itself as a separate unified being. The mirror experience prepares for the child's entry into the symbolic order where by a word stands or represents something else. This paves the way for the acquisition of language and entry into the social world. But it does so at the expense of a split in the child; the earlier imaginary feeling of oneness with its environment is forever lost to it. The mirror image is something which, while establishing its sense of unity and wholeness, the child does so by being something outside of, different from, itself—an Other. The "ideal ego" image of the mirror serves as the basis for all future identifications. And in the darkened cinema auditorium, with the spectator relatively immobile, this mirror stage is reevoked with all the identifications and pleasures attendant to it. This partly explains our fascination and pleasure with cinema.

However, this is not very true of television. Only recently have critical theorists turned towards television and found some obvious differences. In contrast to film, television is usually viewed in domestic surroundings where viewers have control over what is seen. While viewing, move freely around and often leave the viewing area. TV is more intimate and with a stronger sense of immediacy. It is more frequent and treated more casually. This psychoanalytic effects are less operative. Television offers only partial identifications. It is more the recipient of the look and the glance than of the gaze. The voyeuristic mode does not operate so strongly with television. The pleasure mechanisms of television are just now being explored by critical theorists.

I have some personal reservations about the eagerness with which critical/cultural theorists embraced psychoanalysis. Psychologists have learned much more about human behavior, dreams and sexuality than Freud. Many of Freud's ideas lack verification. Some are even refuted. Nevertheless, psychoanalysis does offer a systematic explanation for media pleasure and has generated a great deal of critical activity.

Ideological cultural analysis

Ideological cultural analysis has been another major direction in media criticism. European ideological studies remain more historical, philosophical and theoretical, while the American approach is more empirical, behavioural, and sociological. Today the "rediscovery of ideology" is central to the new paradigm in American media research.

Berger and Luckmann described how our sense of reality is a social construct created and maintained through various social institutions and their practices, in large part by presenting us with a representation of particular reality constructions (primarily those which support the status quo and dominant power structure). Althusser modified Marx's base/superstructure model and redefined ideology as not so much a set of beliefs but as social practices that through representations create the sense that the existing social structure is natural, "the way things are". He identified the family, education, language, religion, the legal system, the political system, and the media, among others, as ideological state apparatus. Media contribute to supporting the dominant ideology by being primary sources of social representations.

A difficulty in Marxist thought is in explaining how capitalism maintains itself without having to resort to coercion. Althusser said that we accept the ruling system because it is represented to us as natural, self-evident, "common sense." Subordinates are led to consent to the system that subordinates them through persuasion and cultural leadership rather than by force. But this system is not omnipotent. Gramsci proposed a theory of hegemony that sees society as a site of struggle between various groups striving for hegemonic power. There is a constant struggle between ideology and social experience. The dominant class has most of the power, but it does not necessarily win. The theory leaves open the opportunity for resistances.

A primary tenet of post structuralist theory is the concept of the construction of the subject. Denying the Cartesian idea of an autonomous, rational subject, this view sees instead a subject constructed through discourses. Our sense of ego, of self, is constructed as we take the positions offered to us by various discourses. A basis for this is found in the Lacanian Mirror Phase whereforth our sense of self is derived from an "other" in the mirror. Then as we grow and mature we take the positions social discourses created for us and from which they create "us". Althusser referred to the process by which this operates as "hailing"—the way we would respond to a call. For example, if I receive a letter from the tax office, I assume the role of taxpayer; if I do not do this, the letter is meaningless whereas a letter from a lover creates an entirely different position for me. Each discourse creates a place, from which subjects can make sense of it. Inhabiting this place, we find pleasure in the sense-making experience. By this process we are made subjects. So our ego is a social construct built up over the years since infancy rather than an autonomous entity. (This idea is not unlike the view of the ego as illusion so common in eastern philosophies).

Feminist studies

Another major approach is feminist criticism. In the early 1970s, feminist criticism was concerned with the absence of positive women media role models. Research looked at the way women were presented in film and television using such techniques as content analysis. Later feminist criticism became concerned with more theoretical issues. Laura Mulvey drew on psychoanalytic theory for her seminal article, claiming that films are made for the male

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audience and feature women characters primarily for the voyeuristic and fetishistic pleasure of the male gaze. Some recent feminist criticism has concentrated on television soap opera serials which are seen as being more women's programs since they are characterised by relationship, continuity rather than narrative closure, intimate conversation, emphasis on problem solving, and the presentation of "good" males who are caring, nurturant, verbal. By contrast, male programs are seen to stress achievement, performance, closure, climax, successful resolutions, goal-orientation, violent action, and a stress on plot over relationships.

We have almost ended our journey through contemporary critical/cultural theory, and now we have arrived at a view of culture that places media right in the center ring—postmodernism.

Postmodernism

There is now a slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies. Contemporary post-modern society develops from the theoretical ideas discussed and the fact of the dominance of media and popular culture. In the past few decades, ideas of authors, audience, reading, writing, book, genre, critical theory and literature have all become questionable. The master narratives and codes of the past, the authoritative centers, have all been overthrown: God, king, father, reason, history, humanism, Marx, Freud, perhaps the state, perhaps even language, have all been seen as largely failures. We have seen the junking of notions of progress, modernization, and technological development. The concept of beauty and the beautiful has been replaced with that of the sublime—the dark, monstrous, ineffable. All is insubstantial. Only the surface matters. Style and excess reign supreme. The self is a commodity. Any position from which to speak or judge is eliminated. The signifier is unattached to any meaningful signified. This is our post-modern world.

Modernism was the major movement over the past half-century or so. It gave us the New Criticism, James Joyce, Proust, Brecht, Picasso, Artaud. But its elitist notions valourized the avant-garde, and the individual work of art and its aesthetic quality. Art was glorified, to be observed at a distance, not touched or trespassed. The artist was a sort of prophet of progress. Museums were like temples containing high art works as sacred objects. Culture was something separate from everday life; popular mass culture was a threat.

Now modernism has been overthrown to be replaced by post-modern. While still an amorphous concept here are some ways it has been characterized. Baudrillard introduced the concept of the similacrum, the simulation for which there is no original. The model precedes and creates the real. Reality no longer matters (it was problematic anyway). Madonna turns herself into a spectacle, a parody, and denies the spectator the empowered voyeuristic gaze. *Miami Vice* is all style and show.

This is the culture of the spectacle (Debord), of the carnival (Bakhtin), a Rabelaisian celebration of bodily pleasure and freedom. It is the age of the hyperreal where simulation—primarily television—is more real than "reality". Life is dissolved into TV with an implosion of meaning.

And if this seems anarchic, perhaps it is. Yet there is something wonderfully freeing about it. We have moved from the authoritative master narratives into a society to be celebrated and enjoyed, to be laughed at and with. And who are better than us to understand and experience it, since in this postmodern carnival, media is in the center ring.

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