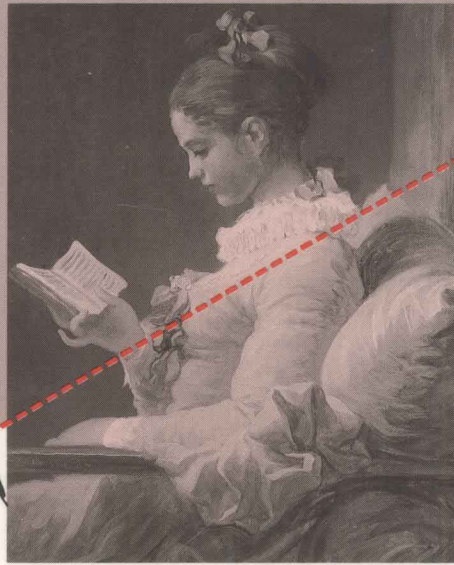


VIEWING, READING, LISTENING



Audiences and Cultural Reception

edited by
Jon Cruz and Justin Lewis

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edited by
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University of California–Santa Barbara

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Introduction

JON CRUZ AND JUSTIN LEWIS

What is an “audience?” How does it come into being? Are audiences more than receptacles for cultural content? Are they just sometimes, or are they always, more than passive consumers assimilating and accommodating what they are given by the marketplace? What is the relationship between externally produced cultural goods and individual, group, race, class, and gender identities? Under what conditions do audiences become actors engaged in struggles over the meanings of the cultural goods that help constitute them as “audiences” in the first place? How do the cultural practices of audiences affect the production of cultural products? And whether it be reading, listening, attending, buying, watching, or in general using an externally produced commodity or communication, how do we, as analysts, proceed from the specific practices of cultural appropriation to the broader parameters established by history, society, and culture in general?

These may seem to be basic questions, but not long ago such questions were of relatively little concern to media sociologists, communication researchers, and humanist scholars. If they were entertained, they were quickly reframed and dispensed with in terms of media effects, persuasion, and public opinion theories. Today, questions about audiences (and related notions like interpretive communities, reading formations, reception, and identity formations) loom large within cultural studies. And these concerns, which surface in overlapping fashion across the social sciences and humanities, challenge us to reconceptualize audiences.

Much of the new interest in audience studies has come about through cross-disciplinary convergences among the social sciences and the humanities. Today it is common for analysts trained in one disciplinary field to seek out kindred debates in other fields. Cross-disciplinary cultural analysis now requires a relative openness, in which the capacity to move beyond narrowly defined intellectual borders is both a necessity and a virtue. The mutual exchange of theories and methods is, perhaps, reminiscent of the late nineteenth century when intellectuals

looked broadly toward the “human sciences” (before twentieth-century scientism purged the plurality of knowledges and equated legitimate inquiry with highly calibrated systems of measurement).

The growing number of cultural analysts no longer content to stay within traditional intellectual boundaries is not simply a gathering of a few smart people with strong intellectual wills. Rather, the scramble for interdisciplinarity is symptomatic of a crisis in the politics of knowledge after poststructuralism. Nowhere is this condition more obvious than in the debates that surround theories of representation and reception. Departments of Communication, Literature, Sociology, History, and other disciplines across the humanities and social sciences have, in many cases, been forced to consider broad questions of representation that cut across their traditional boundaries. The stability of disciplinary canons has been called into question by broader inquiries into ideology and epistemology, inquires that have forced researchers to think reflexively about their own work. People writing about history, culture, and society have begun to look at the ideological and cultural assumptions embedded in their own disciplines—to look at how history, culture, and society have been represented and defined.¹

These questions have produced substantive transformations in some of the more traditional disciplines. Some English departments, for example, have made strides to take on characteristics of ethnic studies programs, now that hitherto silenced texts from the racial and cultural margins have been more widely admitted; and this has come in tandem with a recognition that the cherished master canons never actually transcended the presumably banal social categories of race, class, and gender but, on the contrary, had much to do with such matters in their very installation, their manner of institutionalization, and how they were read. The newer disciplines (such as ethnic studies and women’s studies), on the other hand, have, at least in part, been created out of this interdisciplinary focus on representation. They begin with the premise that traditional forms of inquiry have been constructed with deeply ideological assumptions that have excluded whole categories of thought and activity. How women or ethnic groups have been represented by high culture or popular culture has thus been a growing critical concern. The issue of representation as problematic has opened the way for the examination of a whole cultural process: the process whereby representations are produced, received, and interpreted. This, in turn, has prompted new ways of thinking about audiences.

Many of these interdisciplinary developments have been associated with cultural studies, in which assumptions about culture and ideology have been confronted head-on. Yet with so many different sensibilities coming together, these intellectual endeavors resemble more a cacophony of critical voices than some unified chorus singing from a single score.² Their different concerns, subject matters, and lexicons make any attempt at an overall synthesis an extremely messy business. It is not our intention, therefore, to argue for an overarching, grand theory of audiences, representation, or reception. On the contrary, we feel that the

crisis surrounding representation and reception has virtue in that it opens up sorely needed intellectual debate, unfreezes what disciplines have historically fixed, facilitates fresh engagements, and unties the skills and capacities needed in the critical appraisal of how to rethink the problems of audience analysis.

Theoretical Shifts and the Problem of Reception

The theoretical crisis in the analysis of representation impinges upon cultural analysis in general and audience studies in particular. But the challenges and pressures leading to the reconceptualization of audiences have been building for quite some time. By the end of the 1920s and continuing throughout the 1930s, a critique of orthodox Marxism was unfolding in the writings of Karl Korsch, Georg Lukacs, and Antonio Gramsci; the analytical shift introduced new possibilities for rethinking culture within a framework of historical determination and for conceptualizing it as more than simply a product of an economic system. The notion of history following along inexorable laws that would produce a particular historical subject, the proletariat, was difficult to sustain in the context of modernity. The twin triumphs of authoritarian-bureaucratic state socialism and a profoundly successful consumer capitalism (gently regulated by welfare states) checked rather than delivered the progressive class-conscious proletariat. These forces challenged Marxist historical teleology and eclipsed the vision of a collective subjectivity automatically produced by historical forces.

Much of the early work of reassessing the problems associated with the cultural turn proceeded along a number of intellectually vibrant fronts. Breaking from orthodox or “party” Marxism, Western Marxism began to reinstate the importance of ideology and culture in the social sciences. By the mid-1950s the exiled Frankfurt School theoreticians (Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Leo Lowenthal) had merged cultural Marxism with psychoanalytic and Nietzschean theory to produce an analysis of how mass culture was able to set new conditions governing the cultural consciousness of modern individuals.³ Jurgen Habermas, critiquing the early Frankfurt School yet extending its core theoretical concerns, continued the legacy through the attempt to retrieve modernity’s frustrated promise of a rationally invested critical public sphere in which modern political subjects could achieve freedom from class domination.⁴

In the United States, New Left intellectuals merged the insights of Western Marxism (and “left Weberianism”) and its critique of mass culture with the research produced by revisionist historians during the 1960s and 1970s. Revisionist historicism readdressed the problem of advanced capitalism by exploring the ties among corporate, political, and military power as a distinctly modern social formation (corporate liberalism) and its relation to American politics.⁵ Building on the critical traditions of revisionist historicism and the analysis of forms of social domination, but adding a cultural component to its corporatist critique, social

scientists began to bring issues of race, class, gender, and mass media into the picture of social and cultural historiography.⁶

In France the rise of structuralism and semiotics introduced a major reorientation in cultural analysis. The central importance of symbolic systems was given its first structuralist treatment in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. From this perspective stem some direct routes to structural anthropology and semiotic theory. Claude Levi-Strauss drew upon the Saussurian notion of language, pressing it into service as an analytic metaphor. For Levi-Strauss, the Saussurian model for a science of signs (semiology) provided a new foundation for cultural analysis. Culture could be seen to operate as language did. The linguistic model was seen as applicable to the study of culture for two general but related reasons. First, social and cultural phenomena were more than material objects or events; they were objects and events with particular meanings. And this also made them signs. If such human activity was to have meaning, it must rest on some underlying system of distinctions and relations (or a structure) that could make meaning possible. Second, social and cultural phenomena were not to be grasped as isolated and discrete events possessing an essence all to themselves; instead, they were to be defined through the underlying network of rules and practices—just as languages were.

Adding to the structuralist project of developing a new taxonomy of cultural meanings was Roland Barthes's elaboration of semiology.⁷ Language, artifacts, representations, cultural practices, and social events could be analyzed in terms of how they enabled the production of meanings based on their relation to underlying systems through which they were generated. Within the purview of structuralism, cultural objects or activities were thus understood partly through their position within the overall structure of the system.

At this theoretical juncture additional challenges emerged. If, as Barthes argued, language did not simply represent a verifiable reality but instead produced ideology or myth, then the whole rational edifice upon which inquiry was based was in jeopardy. And this is precisely the point where Michel Foucault's work in discourse theory, circulated in the 1970s and early 1980s, entered the picture. How could rational minds inescapably mired in the myth-making tools of language ever prove the existence of underlying structures? If ideas in general—including scientific notions of structure as well as reason, nature, and truth—were symbolic constructs, then the problem was not to take the content of representations at face value but rather to interrogate the systems that produced regimes of representations themselves. In this reorientation, the very concept of *structure*, at least as a fixed and specifiable entity discoverable through the excavating tools of a neutral language, became suspect. This emerging distaste for the concept of structure ushered in a new host of issues that by the late 1970s hovered under the umbrella of poststructuralism. Rejecting the concept of structure gave symbolic production more autonomy. And with this newly claimed autonomy, cultural analysis could be approached as discourse analysis and the study of discursive practices.

In the mid-1970s the emergence of cultural studies, associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Britain, was launched within the very juncture of Western Marxism's crisis around class politics, working-class histories, and traditional as well as emergent forms of popular culture. The attempt to re-think the importance of signification and political economy played a major role in the formation of British cultural studies. Here, the broader problems of Western Marxism were extended through the theoretical contributions of the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci and the structural Marxism of Louis Althusser. The cultural sphere, in all of its sprawling manifestations, was seen as the key terrain upon which politics, power, and domination were mediated. Some of the notable achievements of British cultural studies at this point were the remappings of media analysis and working-class cultures. Integrating insights from Gramsci and Althusser, Stuart Hall helped to frame the theoretically innovative approaches that combined the analysis of the relations of classes, subcultures, race, gender, and mass media. Ethnographic assessments of everyday life within the sphere of larger institutional and social structures characterized these class-specific ethnographies.⁸ Such syntheses in the cultural analyses of the center's formative years were responsible for launching a widespread interest in this form of cultural studies, and the influence on ethnographic work has been significant.

As cultural studies expanded in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the integration of theoretical considerations was extended in new and critical ways. These went beyond British Marxist labor historicism and structural Marxism to include poststructuralism, semiology, and psychoanalytic theory. Much of this work focused on media analysis and was published in the journals *Screen* and *Screen Education*. However, the absorption of poststructuralism within British cultural studies did not produce a rejection of Marxist theory (as did deconstructionism in the United States). Class and economic issues as well as race and gender were not disregarded, nor was the importance of ideology or the state dismissed. Given that cultural studies had roots in social theory, these elements were retained as important in grasping key (but not ontologized or essentialized) configurations of social relations.⁹ What poststructuralism invigorated was a critical rereading of Marx salvaged from orthodox Marxism and an illumination of the cultural blind spots found in class and/or economic reductionism. By the late 1970s the centrality of gender theorizing appeared as an additional critique of social and cultural theories. It was at this juncture that historiography, psychoanalytic (Lacanian) theory, and subculture studies began to incorporate as well as transform feminist theorizing in ways that, in turn, challenged and transformed the contours of cultural studies.¹⁰

The cultural orientation within Western Marxism, the American critique of corporate liberalism, the linguistic turn in French structuralism, the elaboration of subculture and media analysis conducted by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and the fields of semiotic theory and poststructuralism helped to open up the study of signification and its relation to ideology, institutions, cul-

tural practices, and modes of social exchange. In various combinations, these developments bequeathed the now sprawling intellectual terrain of cultural studies. In this regard, the very cracks opened by Western Marxism's critique of economism and problematizing culture became chasms that were filled with the crisis of representation and the new complexities of cultural production.¹¹

Related to these theoretical shifts were developments in literary theory and textual interpretation. The rise of reader-response theory emerged as a direct challenge to New Criticism by rejecting the analytic assumptions that the meanings of texts were contained in the texts themselves. Reader-response theory argued for a restoration of the importance of readers, and the problems of interpretation shifted toward investigation of the formation of identity by focusing on the reader. In highlighting the act of reading texts and not simply the facticity and objectivity of texts themselves, reader-response theory repositioned the problem of cultural production within literary studies. Stanley Fish's notion of interpretive communities endorsed the centrality of the reader by arguing that interpretive conventions govern reception; thus authorial intent—what authors and producers of texts want to convey—mattered less than the interpretive strategies readers bring to texts. Shifting attention to the practices of reading did not mean abandoning texts but instead repositioning texts and their interpretation, and this, in turn, forced literary theory toward social theory. The return of the reader in literary theory facilitated moves that shared a set of interpretive analytics having considerable overlap with the developments that inform contemporary cultural studies. Indeed, the importance given to the analysis of cultural practices and cultural production has facilitated the vibrant ties between social theory and literary theory.¹²

From Markets to Politics

At the turn of the century, popular literature, newspapers, and magazines had already found their niche in well-established markets. By the mid-1920s, cinema, the recording industry, and radio broadcasting were well on their way toward becoming large-scale media institutions. The rise of mass culture, so central to the modern form of democratic capitalist consumer society, was profoundly unsettling to earlier and more traditional institutions of cultural authority. Social scientists, humanists, religious leaders, and lay critics were increasingly compelled to respond to the new conditions of mass culture. In the United States, modern social science research in mass communications evolved hand in glove with the industrial spread of mass media. In the decades between 1920 and 1960, broadcasting was institutionalized and rationalized. In the emerging academic focus on mass communication, the notion of audience rapidly became formalized within social science.

A number of related developments in this era were important. Economic calamity and social upheaval during the depression of the 1930s raised the question

of managing governmental legitimacy with the challenges of social control. President Roosevelt's "fireside chats" with the American radio audience reflected the new recognition of the functional ties among broadcasting, the public, and government. Two major wars, World War II and the Korean War, encompassing the 1940s and 1950s, added new dimensions to the cultural relations between mass media and the state. Industrial expansion, the growth of suburbs, and the rise of radio and television broadcasting helped to expand and deepen the institutionalization of modern consumer society as publics became addressed as audiences for consumer goods. As publications were transformed by new technology and new markets, so were the publics that consumed them. In a society increasingly solidified through mass communication, audiences became ever more important to political, industrial, educational, and broadcasting interests. Not surprisingly, the analysis of audiences developed along with new approaches in the social sciences: the emergent fields of public opinion, propaganda analysis, techniques of persuasion, public relations, and market research. The links forged between the various social science subfields and media research culminated in the dominance of the market-centered study of mass culture and audiences. Todd Gitlin's essay on the "dominant paradigm" was one of the first attempts to explore the systematic development of how American media sociology came into being, in relation to the pressures industrialization placed on scientific inquiry. Tracing the theoretical, intellectual, and social roots of mass communication analysis, Gitlin revealed how the theories, models, and methods that characterized much of sociology's communication research were forged in and compromised with the rise of the industrialization of media itself.¹³

While the rise of media studies in the first half of the twentieth century had deep ties to the industrialization of culture, the questions being asked were not only in response to industry's needs. Mass culture was met with responses that ran the gamut from consumerist glee to apprehension and dread. A number of significant examples illustrate the clash between market and moral imperatives. As an important form of leisure for the urban white ethnic working class, nickelodeons were frowned upon. Disapproval turned to scorn when more and more members from middle and upper-middle classes began to attend the movies that were viewed as corrosive to moral conduct.¹⁴ In a similar fashion, the dance craze of the 1920s, with white youth finding pleasure in the music and dances emanating from African American enclaves, engendered much apprehension. To this chronology we might add the famous Payne Fund studies on movies and their association with juvenile delinquency in the early 1930s. The debates over mass culture and youth carried forward into the mid-1950s with major Senate hearings on television and an invigorated investigation by social scientists.¹⁵ In addition, comic books, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll were indicted for their corrosive effects on youth. Ironically, moral and political panics surrounding popular culture coincided with well-designed foreign policy programs launched by the national security strategists who went to great length to promote abroad the same

aspects of popular culture vilified at home. Demonized in the popular press, African American music was fit for export through “goodwill” tours to Soviet-bloc and nonaligned Third World nations, whose populations were perceived to be politically exploitable through the weaponry of American popular culture.

These examples marked highly contentious relations between market-driven incursions into popular culture and the attempts by cultural and moral gatekeepers to put a brake on cultural commodification and to resist the market’s capacity to flood particular communities with new forms of leisure. Indeed, the rise of media-effects research in media social science was shaped, in part, by the cultural battles between the pressures of market expansion and the moral responses concerned with the market’s perceived detrimental effects. Besides the questions that dominated early research on media effects and those singularly focused on the effects of advertising or political campaigns, many concerns were symptomatic of broad anxieties about the emerging mass culture: Did the media influence political attitudes, or, alternatively, did they create forms of deviancy?

Consistent with the ambiguity and anxiety that surrounded the new social order, the emerging conceptions of audiences were constructed primarily on either moral or market-based scaffolding—and sometimes on both. On the one hand, audiences were understood as social entities (communities, youth, women, and so on) in need of protection from an overpowering set of external cultural forces (mass media) that overrode the local family or community. On the other hand, audiences were viewed as targets for market-centered campaigns geared to expand and streamline consumer society. The attention to mass media thus had a double function: It absorbed the threats to social norms, and it helped further normalize and deepen consumerism. Both perspectives promoted distinct ways in which audiences were conceptualized.

Within this market-versus-morals framework, the meaning of the audience came to rest, always tendentiously, on a simple presupposition: “Audience” assumed an assembly of passive yet malleable listeners whose attention was devoted to an externally produced communication, a view rooted in the earlier debate over the new industrially dependent mass society during the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, while the concerns of market engineers and social guardians were similar (both saw the new mass audience as a function of the new mass media), they worked within very different conceptual frameworks. To the guardians of public morals or tastes, the audience was cast in the role of victim, molded by media to conform to certain ways of thinking and behaving. For the advocates of consumerism, on the other hand, the audience could be not be regarded simply as putty to be shaped in the privacy of corporate boardrooms. The ideology of consumerism—particularly when pitted against a communist system in which the public was portrayed as witlessly manipulated by state propaganda—was sold by embracing the notion of consumer choice. The concept of mass audiences sat uncomfortably with the ideology of individual freedom on which the consumer society was supposed to be predicated.

It was, perhaps, ironic in this regard that the media-effects tradition that dominated early research suggested (rightly or wrongly) that the media were more influential in promoting consumerism than in instituting more general moral, political, or behavioral change.¹⁶ To many researchers at the time, in other words, the effects of advertising campaigns were more demonstrable than the effects of media on political attitudes or behavior. The ideology (rather than the operation) of free market consumerism required research models that spoke very differently about audiences. The rise of “uses and gratifications” theory in the late 1950s was, in this sense, far more compatible with the self-effacing public identity of corporate capitalism. The new perspective self-consciously reversed the roles in the media/audience relationship: No longer the victim of media, the “free” audience was seen as the determining force that shaped the form and content of media to its own needs and interests. The debate about audiences thus became (and remains) enshrined within debates about free market capitalism. We can find common political threads between free market theorists and those who see audiences as groups of active individuals who can mold the meaning of mass media to suit their particular interests.¹⁷ The political forces on the other side of this equation are more disparate: Marxists and McCarthyites alike represented a tendency to see media as all-powerful and the mass audience as too witless or feeble to defend itself from its rampaging hegemonic influence.

Since the 1950s and 1960s, audience theories on the Right and on the Left have followed very different paths. The Right remains caught between two contradictory positions: on the one hand asserting the power of consumers in a free market to get the media they want (a capitalist version of democracy in which wallets and purses, as the vessels of consumer choice, replace the sacred symbol of the ballot box), and on the other berating the media for causing a decline in moral values. Thus, in the last days of the Bush administration, Vice President Dan Quayle, the son of a newspaper magnate, was able to blame the “liberal” media for its failure to reflect the “true” values of the majority of Americans, while simultaneously expressing faith, like a good free marketeer, in the corporate world’s ability to do just that. The contradictions here are profound: To put it bluntly, if the free marketeers are correct and the media are liberal, it can only be because the audience prefers it that way.

The Right has, in the last two decades, offered some interesting intellectual interventions in a number of areas, but audience research is not one of them. This is an area in which the right-wing intelligentsia are conspicuous by their absence, and the theories of media and audience that are still fashionable on the Right have remained bogged down in conception that the more sophisticated branches of social science abandoned many years ago. The Left, on the other hand, has sought to come to terms with some of its own contradictions. The levels of determinacy in the media/audience relationship thus have been reconceived in order to retain the notion of the mass media as a powerful ideological apparatus while granting au-