

Media Reception Theory: Emerging Perspectives

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RESUMO

A teoria da recepção se desenvolveu muito nos anos recentes com a tradição de estudos culturais da pesquisa de meio e reflete os debates e as diferentes escolas de pensamento desta tradição. Porém, é comum a todas as abordagens a premissa de que os usos do meio e seus efeitos devem ser interpretados em termos das construções subjetivas de significado alocado no meio ou do significado que é desenvolvido em resposta ao meio. A metodologia de pesquisa típica, que trabalha visando teorias interpretativas de recepção, é alguma forma de "etnografia de audiência", que demanda que o pesquisador reconstrua o significado do meio a partir do ponto de vista do sujeito.

Palavras chave: teoria da recepção; meio; metodologia de pesquisa; construção de significado.

ABSTRACT

Reception theory has developed in recent years largely within the cultural studies tradition of Media research and reflects the debates and differing schools of thought of that tradition. Common to all the different approaches, however, is the premise that media use and effects are to be interpreted in terms of the subjective constructions of meaning placed on media or the meaning that are developed in response to media. The typical research methodology, working toward interpretative theories of reception, is some form of "audience ethnography" which demands that the researcher reconstruct the meaning of media from the subject's perspective.

Key words: Theory reception, Media, Methodology Research, Construct Meaning

RESUMEN

La teoría de la recepción se ha desarrollado ampliamente en los últimos años dentro de la tradición cultural de estudios sobre "media". Y refleja las discusiones y las distintas corrientes de pensamiento de aquella tradición. Sin embargo, la premisa común a todas las distintas investigaciones es que los usos y efectos de la "media" son interpretados en términos de construcciones subjetivas del sentido localizado en la "media", o del sentido que se desarrolla como contestación a la "media". La metodología característica de la investigación en el campo de la "media", trabajando en la dirección de las teorías interpretativas de la recepción, es alguna forma de "audiencia etnográfica" la cual exige que el investigador reconstruya el sentido de la "media" de la perspectiva de sujeto.

Palabras clave: Teoría de Recepción, Media, Metodología de la investigación
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Reception theory has developed in recent years largely within the cultural studies tradition of media research and reflects the debates and differing schools of thought of that tradition. Common to all the different approaches, however, is the premise that media use and effects are to be interpreted in terms of the subjective constructions of meaning placed on media or the meanings that are working toward interpretive theories of reception, is some form of "audience ethnography" which demands that the researcher reconstruct the meaning of media from the subject's perspective.

In part, moves toward reception theory are a result of the failure to verify empirically the "source predicted" and "source-directed" effects of media whether these predictions are premised on the power of psychological persuasion or on ideological coercion. Although something of predicted effects always turn up in questionnaire responses, when respondents are free they gave an immense variety of interpretations that are quite unpredictable on the basis of psychological or social systems theory. Secondly, reception theory is a product of socio-political values of theorists who believe in the active participation of audiences in the construction of culture and think that a research priority is to provide an understanding of audience activity as a basis of a policy of democratization of media. Thirdly, national development policies, which have been premised on the use of centrally-controlled media to re-educate the populace and rapidly integrate citizens into a single national system, have often been a notorious failure no matter how idealistic the conception of society. This has led to policy proposals based on less rationalistic conceptions of audience interests and constructions of cultural meaning. Finally, those whose interests in media have been more aesthetic and open to the pleasure and playfulness of popular culture and popular entertainment have found the social engineering conceptions of media simply repugnant, inhuman, pompous and, ultimately, irrelevant. If we are dealing with an entertainment medium, why not start with the questions of why and how people find pleasure in the media.

Granted these broad commonalities in the development of reception theory, one can point out four different approaches related to different socio-political and cultural contexts:

1) The Anglo-American critical cultural studies tradition with a neo-Marxist orientation and considerable borrowing from structuralist/analysis (French theorists such as Bourdieu, Foucault and Baudrillard are among important influences); 2) an American symbolic interactionist tradition much

closer to functionalist approaches; 3) the consensual cultural studies tradition with strong roots in the cognitive cultural anthropology of people as varied as Clifford Geertz, Claude Levi-Strauss and Victor Turner; and 4) a tradition grounded in theories of hegemony (especially Gramsci) which sees subaltern social classes incorporated into the power structure in a way that gains their consensus by inviting and recognizing their active cultural contribution. This latter position (particularly developed in Latin America) tends to see the media as a site of struggle for the recognition of different cultural movements. In the following pages I shall attempt to trace the development and particular emphases of these four approaches to reception theory.

1. The Anglo-American Critical Cultural Studies Approach.

The British cultural studies tradition is a convenient starting point because virtually all varieties of reception theory acknowledge some intellectual indebtedness to people such as Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson and Richard Hoggart.

Williams was one of the first to speak of the media not in terms of transport of information but as a text which reveals the cultural meanings we are creating in any given historical period. This shifts the key questions one asks about media from some exterior, "objective" behavioristic impact defined by persuasive intentions or by personality systems theory to subjective interpretation of meaning. Also implied is the public debate about historical directions of a culture. Williams came from the field of drama and literary criticism, and he brought with him a series of new analytic methodologies from the humanistic tradition that provided the foundations for the qualitative methods of reception theory: hermeneutic textual interpretation which tries to understand the meaning of a "text" in terms of the socio-cultural and historical context of both "reader" and the "writer"; the capacity of "readers" to rework the meaning of a text in terms of their own peculiar context; and an enduring concern for the problematic of popular resistance to ideology and hegemonic forces.

E. P. Thompson and Richard Hoggart were likewise important in that their studies of the working class culture presented this culture from the "inside", the way it appeared to the working class people themselves, and because it presented the working class not simply as a passively exploited group, but as people who create simply as a passively exploited group, but as people who create their own parallel tradition in spite of modernization, mass media and the incorporation into mass culture. Thompson and Hoggart looked at the way the working classes, just becoming literate, reworked written or other forms of mediated texts to express their own cultural context and aspirations. But it also opened up the problem of how the texts and meanings produced by the working class people could later be co-opted and transformed by the mass media into capitalist mechanisms of mass marketing and massive accumulations of profit.

Thus, Williams, Thompson and Hoggart defined in an initial way the key question for the critical theory of media reception: how can subaltern classes contest, subvert, transform and otherwise liberate themselves from the dominant preferred reading encoded into the mass media message?

Hoggart was the first director of the institution which was to become one of the major propagators of the issues and methodologies of critical reception theory, the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. Hoggart set the CCCS on the path of studying how different subcultures used media and other textual symbols to dramatize their interpretation of their situation. But it was Stuart Hall who faced most directly the need for an acceptable intellectual explanation of the apparent freedom of the working class and particular groups in the working classes to produce their often antagonistic subcultures and at the same time remain so impotent in shaping the dominant culture and political history of a country.

For Stuart Hall, director of the CCCS from 1968 to 1979, and for others associated with or influenced by the CCCS, three questions became central to communication research: 1) How do powerful allies in liberal, capitalistic societies such as Britain, with institutions of democratic debate and consensus formation, still succeed in maintaining ideological control and in gaining the apparently willing consent of subordinated groups to this ideology? 2) How could it be true that media institutions are, at the same time, free of direct compulsion and constraint and yet freely articulate themselves systematically around definitions of situation which favor the hegemony of the powerful? 3) How can the cultural signifying practices in clothing, music and language inversions such as "black is beautiful" utilized by movements among working-class youth, women and racial minorities counteract dominant ideologies and introduce a "cultural justice"?

Underlying this research was a deeper questioning of the classical Marxist theory of culture which argued that by changing the base of economic institutions and relations of social power, changes in the cultural superstructure would automatically follow. In practice, minority movements were concerned not just with jobs and investment policy but also with the politics of cultural symbols in racial identification or gender language which gave cultural and political legitimacy to the social power of subordinate groups. In short, cultural meanings and ideology constituted a relatively autonomous field of political struggle in itself.

Underlying structuralist analysis of culture is the principle that the words and grammar of language are not simply an objective reproduction of things and events in the real world but are relatively selective, arbitrary, social constructions. A crucial premise in the critical tradition is that a particular meaning gains the dominant credibility, legitimacy and taken-for-grantedness while other interpretations of reality of less powerful groups are downgraded or excluded. This conception of the dominant ideology or "preferred reading" built into the media is central for critical reception theory, but it also creates a dilemma. On the one hand, democratic liberationists such as Hall have been concerned with how exploitative ideologies

are allowed to come into existence and are accepted, but, on the other hand, he is also concerned with explaining how they can be subverted and "dethroned".

The CCCS and Stuart Hall were important in borrowing from linguistics, semiotics and structuralism conceptions which explain how the signifying practices of language and the formation of world views could become an arena of class struggle. Hall (1982) suggested work with three basic characteristics of signification which enabled the oppressed to liberate themselves from the dominant, preferred reading: 1) the insight, from Volosinov, that the polysemic nature of language permits the same word to have multiple meanings and that liberating meanings are often latent in a cultural tradition ready to be brought forward through awareness of the importance of language; 2) the fact that meaning tend to derive a natural, sacred, rigidly univocal character from their broader mythic context and that language must be relativized through processes of demythologizing and relativizing of the meaning of the words; 3) that dominant ideologies enter, especially, into the connotative, associative meanings of words and that it is easier to change the connotative sense of words, for example, the association of the word, "black" with com alliterative, "beautiful". Hall was simply explaining what had been the age old practices of movements such as the Mexican peasant movement that transformed the meaning of peasant, Indian and rural into the image of the liberating heroes of the nation. But he was attempting o address the failacies of the powerful media, powerful ideology arguments then holding sway in media studies.

A major break came with Morley's attempt to test empirically Hall's thesis that TV viewers are likely to decode the preferred, dominant message in an agreeing, negotiating or rejecting style according to their social class status and their socio-political interests. Morley's conclusion was that individuals draw upon a composite of often unrelated and even contradictory social and personal histories in their resistive reading (1980). A much more open ended audiencer ethnography is needed to understand how viewers negotiate with the preferred reading.

Fiske's Television Culture (1987) summarized many of the audience ethnography studies with the thesis that the polysemy of the television text tends to "provoke" a variety of resistive, alternative meanings. Fiske is more typical of an approach that looks for the "cause" of the resistive, alternative response of the audience in characteristics of the text that encourage an independent skepticism such as verbal/visual irony, metaphor, parody and satire, the excess of meaning that a diverse team of writers instills, the use of well-known genres that invite people to work out the plot along with the producers, the obvious intertextual comparison of the television program with the film or novel, or the attempts to get audiences totally involved by fangroups, promotion and hype.

One of the most significant lines of reception research is a move away from the classical Marxist view that the pleasure of the working classes is simply a strategy for inducing political quiescence toward the view that subordinated groups have seized upon the element of vulgar pleasure and

relish as a symbol of their independence precisely because it appears to be subversive to dominant groups (Hebdige, 1979; Morley, 1989). Grossberg (1984) has pointed out that rock music is such a symbol to the young; Brown shows that fans of women's daytime soap opera seize upon precisely the "trashiness" and low production qualities as a defiant symbol of their in-group solidarity (1990). Martin-Barbero argues that in Latin America the beginning of political subversion is in melodrama (1987). The subversiveness and liberation lies in the in-group raucous pleasure in a genre they claim as their own, overturning boundary lines and parodying the straight-laced rationality of those who can't understand why such a genre is pleasurable and who see it as alienating.

2. The Symbolic Interactionist Approach

This conception of media reception is based on the premise that producers and users of media are interacting in the production of meaning analogous to the way that meaning is created in interpersonal interaction. This is essentially a social psychological approach which traces back to theories of George Herbert Mead regarding the development of the self-concept and to the sociologists of the "Chicago School" in the 1930s and 1940s - Robert Park, Herbert Blumer. It has entered the world of communication theory in recent years largely through the work of Erving Goffman (1959), Howard Becker (1990), David Altheide and Robert Snow (1979), Thomas Lindlof's book, *Natural Audiences* (1987), reports examples of reception studies in the symbolic interactionist tradition.

In contrast to more deterministic psychological models, "symbolic interaction views the individual as a creature of voluntary action, who in the process of action creates meaning in concert with others and through a symbolic system we call language..... People act to establish, maintain, and defend their sense of self, as fundamentally "self" is the most important meaning or set of meanings that a person has....[Thus] identity establishment and maintenance is the nexus of all social relations whether they occur through overt interpersonal relations or a massa medium. (Snow, 1983: 237-238).

The foundation of this reception theory is that both media producers and users are negotiating with each other to obtain responses that coincide with the intentions of the respective actors. People creating the media seek to establish identities through favorable responses from their professional peers and from the audience in such direct forms as letters, calls and casual comments on the street or more indirect ways such as awards, rating points, product sales, and circulation figures. Audience members may take identity models directly from the media or media may supply the identity achievement strategies and the sources for validation of identities. Regardless of whether one starts from the side of media production or from the side of the user, it is taken for granted that, given the prevasiveness of media in people's

lives today, the logic of negotiation in mediated communication is setting the standards for identity definition, achievement and validation in contemporary culture. All cultures have found a way to inculcate identities through story telling or other ways, and today we do this largely through the mass popular media.

More specifically, the presupposition in much research in this perspective is that media is a source of information, situation and strategies for playing out identities. People learn how to perceive, define and deal with their environment through media logic. Most important, people become highly familiar with the formulas of media logic, for example, the predictable, formulaic nature of certain program genres, and learn how to negotiate with those constructions of meaning in order to establish, achieve and validate their personal identities (Traudt and Lont, 1987: 139-160).

Some of the most interesting lines of research following this approach (although these may not be specifically premised on the symbolic interactionist social psychological approach) are studies of how people use television programs they have seen "the night before" as the "medium" of discourse networks among particular groups of people and, specifically, as the medium for defining and validating identities. Dorothy Hobson analyses how women, talking in spare moments during work hours, "had used television to its and their best advantage, to advance their understanding of themselves and the world in which they live" (1990: 70).

Another line of research is how the selection of particular television programs within the family viewing situation defines personal masculine/feminine identities, intra-family power and status relations, and leisure identities (Lull, 1980, 1988; Morley, 1986).

3. The Consensual Cultural Studies Tradition

While the critical tradition takes its starting point for reception theory from the problematic of resistance to dominant ideologies, the consensual tradition thinks that the creation and maintenance of a shared culture is a prior and more important problematic (Silverstone, 1981: 1-25; Newcomb and Alley, 1983: 3-45). Beyond culture there is nonsense, irrationality, chaos, and it is fundamental to human groups to constantly seek some form of ordered meaning. We cannot simply take meaning and value for granted. This has to be constantly created, changed and recreated. For a people to continue to exist as a unified community, it must constantly critique and reestablish its ordered interpretation of the world.

One of the most central figures in this tradition is James Carey with his ritual, communion metaphor for societal communication. In a foundational article, Carey is largely attempting to develop an approach to media studies alternative to the "transport" model that until the (1977) had dominated American media studies. Carey and others associated with him consider most American media studies to be posing questions from the wrong perspective

and thereby distorting profoundly the meaning of media for people at both the collective and the individual level (Newcomb, 1978). The American positivistic tradition, in its effort to be "scientific" and justify its existence in terms of social engineering goals, has tended to impose its analytic constructions of reality. Carey, Newcomb and others suggest that we must begin by asking the media producers and users what the media content means to them.

In a 1978 article, Newcomb challenged the methodology of Gerbner's analyzing violence in American media and American culture, suggesting that Gebner had simply imposed his own arbitrary conception of violence and that this is not necessarily the conception of violence of the American public. Newcomb suggested a three step approach that reveals the reception theory of consensual cultural studies. The first step is to recognize that symbols such as violence have not simply originated in television but have a long cultural history which demands that we first study the complex meaning that a set of symbols such a violence would have a long cultural history which demands that we first study the complex meaning that a set of symbols such as violence would have in American cultural history. A second step is to examine the meaning of these symbols in contemporary television, especially in the typical formulaic genres of television. A third step is a type of audience ethnography which will pick up the different meanings that symbols of violence have for different groups and the same group in different connotational contexts.

Consensual cultural studies tend to see the mass media as a forum, a public space where cultural meanings that have a long history in a particular culture are presented to be re-examined and debated by different cultural sectors (Newcomb, 1983). Newcomb compares television to the Greek chorus which attempts to articulate what the public thinks about a particular action on the stage. The success of television is its ability to articulate the common view of things so that a broad cross-section of people can recognize their identities in the media. Newcomb and Thorburn (1987) would question whether highly idiosyncratic personal expressions that do not articulate a very wide consensus can, in fact, be classed as higher quality popular art.

Indeed, David Thorburn argues that the aesthetic of television is best described as "consensus narrative" in which society's central beliefs and values undergo continuous rehearsal, testing and revision. "Its assignment—so to say—is to articulate the culture's central mythologies, in a widely accessible language, an inheritance of shared stories, plots, character types, cultural symbols and narrative conventions. Such language is popular because it is legible to the common understanding of a majority of the culture..." (1987).

The stress, in this perspective, is less on the individual interpretation of meanings and more on a public debate or celebration. Carey compares the media analyst to the professional literary/drama critic who has the responsibility and the capacity to reveal what kind of culture we are creating with a particular text and invite the people to reflect on whether this is the kind of

culture they want—or whether they think that new symbols and values are somehow contrary to the logic of the culture.

As the method proposed by Newcomb above indicates, it is important to see a culture as a long cultural process in which a people (implied, a national society) is continually trying to make sense out of its context and establish a mythic direction to its history. Newcomb and others apply anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of "liminality", a symbolic threshold between utopia and our everyday pragmatic world provided by ritual and theatre. The liminal is a space of cultural freedom and release from everyday commitments which enables us to critically examine our everyday culture in the light of much broader values and world view. Television is a kind of liminal experience in the sense that people go out of everyday pragmatic time into a kind of mythic, utopian time in a way that gives them broader perspective on their everyday commitments. Like ritual, television is a leisure-time activity which allows people's subjective feelings to come to the surface so that they can be reflected on in the light of the narrative plot presented to them in an essentially oral medium. Cultural meanings are not simply static instruments of oppression but are the material for continual question and reformulating as new evidence appears.

Silvestone suggests that television functions like myth in that it takes the new, the highly specialized esoteric information, the irrational, the mysterious and weaves it back into the common sense frameworks that make it understandable to the general public.

Typical of research in this perspective are the many commentaries on particular outstanding TV series which take the stance of the literary, film or television critic who examines the content of the work in terms of its achievement as a significant aesthetic and cultural expression of our time (Carey, 1975). In this case the critic is standing in for the rest of the audience or, if audience studies are done, the audience is approached as a critic as in the studies done by the research units of public broadcasting organizations such as the IBA in Britain or those sponsored by the RAI in Italy.

In the United States this approach to reception is found in the popular culture research which is simply interested in how people enjoy popular culture and how they celebrate their culture.

This approach typically takes a historical perspective examining how a particular genre of television or series within a genre gathers up cultural symbols of the past, refashions them to articulate current sociocultural movements and then asks what is the likely contribution of this movement to present and/or future synthesis of a particular national culture. For example, Hoover (1988), in his study of the role of the "electronic church" and the evangelical fundamentalist movement in American cultural history, gathered in-depth personal histories of followers of the televangelist Pat Robertson in order to understand the significance of this movement for these supposedly typical followers. These life histories, in fact, span several generations of American history and are the base of interpreting the historical origins and cultural significance of this media-based movement.

4. Struggle for Recognition in the Public Cultural Sphere

This fourth approach to reception theory would admit that individuals are actively constructing meaning in terms of their own life stories, but argues that a more important dimension of this especially in regard to the mass or public media, is the attempt of audiences to define and defend their sociocultural identity by struggling to gain a tolerance of and recognition of that subcultural identity within the common, public cultural sphere. This approach emerges most directly from the critical cultural studies tradition, but the failures of that tradition in political praxis, in media reform movements and as empirical theory have forced a reformulation that incorporates some premises of the consensual cultural studies and negotiation approaches. Some of the most coherent articulations of this emerging approach appear in Latin American communication scholars such as J. Martin-Barbero (1987) and Jorge Gonzalez (1987), but this synthesis reflects my own recent efforts to explain the role of media and their publics in the formation of the civil society (White, 1990).

An initial premise is an adaptation of a Gramscian conception of hegemony explaining how powerful coalitions gain the consent of subordinate groups by incorporating in the public cultural sphere some of the identity symbols of the subordinate cultural groups. Critical cultural studies argues that the public cultural sphere is rather tightly controlled by a dominant coalition and the activity of the audience is only to react to accept, contest, and reinterpret the single preferred reading that comes from the organic unity of the culture industries with other production in a capitalist society. The "sociocultural identity" approach agrees that culture is a space for struggle from a base of social power, but sees this as the arena for the confrontation of many different "cultural fronts", each trying to gain the consent to and recognition of its cultural identity by other cultural fronts (Gonzalez, 1987: 5-44). When one moves into the area of culture, there are complex divisions of ethnic, regional, racial and religious cultural division that often cut across and complicate divisions along lines of relations to production. And in this cultural no-man's-land, although the commercial, capitalist interests may define the parameters of the debate over what identities are to be included in the public cultural sphere, popular culture tends to occupy the central space of cultural debate and to impose its logic and language more powerfully.

This popular culture is not just the aspirations and interpretations emanating from an ethos of the factory and production, but is constituted by a great variety of movements that share the inability to define the parameters of the debate: in many of the exploding Third World cities, the masses of immigrants creating communities on the peripheries of cities; the movements organized around gender and age issues; the diverse groups organized to obtain better services from hospitals or schools; the amalgam of religious identities with utopian political values; environmentalist groups; indigenous and/or regional cultures; etc.

A cultural front or movement is constituted by individuals who share the same life context—such as immigrants on the periphery of the city—and who create a pattern of interaction to cope with their situation. This interaction creates a particular language and a set of group identity symbols which becomes a double-sided rhetoric to mobilize people within and to dramatize power and competence to competitive groups who may question or threaten the existence of the particular cultural front. This rhetorical language gains further consistency and permanence through at least inchoative media forms: the typical public symbols that a front adopts for itself; its graffiti; informal entertainment such as music making, street drama or story telling; its styles of speech making; and the formulaic apologetic for the goodness of particular cultural interpretations of reality. With the spread of low-cost offset presses, local radio or other more technologically mediated expressions, a much broader mediated form of public rhetoric develops even in semi-literate groups.

As Jorge Gonzalez notes (1987), every cultural front is anxious to promote its particular cultural interpretation throughout the existing cultural space because, if it is not accepted as legitimate within the particular synthesis or world view and values that constitute the public cultural sphere, its cultural existence is constantly threatened and individuals are constantly siphoned away into adherence to other cultural fronts. For example, if immigrant groups cannot convince the public that their way of life on the edge of the city also has a legitimate right to a just allocation of the resources of the city, then they will not be able to maintain the material existence of their community.

Thus the public cultural sphere is a kind of "no man's land" of interfaces between the rhetorical discourses of particularistic cultural communities and subcommunities. In the context of interfacing, the dramaturgical discourse of each cultural group seeks a way to get the other cultural fronts to consent to the value of its existence not only in itself but also for the good of the other groups. To do this, each cultural front must attempt to understand something of the logic of the discourse of other groups and why those discourses are so important to their adherents in order to discover elements in its own discourse which will be value by other groups. Each dramaturgy argues the value of its interpretation of the context not only for each other group but for the context as a whole. The rhetoric points toward common symbols at the areas of interfacing, symbols widely shared by different groups. The symbols have a different meaning within the internal logic of each discourse, but, precisely because of the multifaceted nature of symbols, they hold together in tension different interpretations. In these negotiated symbols, all parties can recognize something of their identity. And it is in these processes of social dramaturgy forcing the continual reinterpretation of particularistic discourses around symbols of common legitimacy that we find the formation of a public cultural sphere.

Jorge Gonzalez (1991) gives a series of examples of what a may be called public cultural rituals in which all of the different cultural fronts are present dramatizing their identities in order to defend their existence by

convincing others of their interpretation. For example, in annual community festivals typical of many Latin American regional cities, the official church displays itself in the festival with its most solemn sacramental rites and ritual vestments, indian/peasant communities don costumes for traditional folk dances, political parties bring out insignia, youth dances to its loudest rock music. At the same time, each cultural front points to a common symbol that may have different meaning for each group: the patron saint that means something quite different in official Catholic theology than for peasant devotions, but accepted by all; the young lady, selected by approbation of middle class mothers, to be crowned queen of the festival by the mayor (head of the political party) in front of the Cathedral and the statue of the Virgin to the cheers of the young men in the background.

The mass popular media, however, not only come closest to being synonymous with the public cultural sphere, but provide a space within which producer/entrepreneur become an active agency articulating the identities of particular cultural fronts and then enabling these fronts to have a legitimated presence in the public cultural sphere. Hoover's study of the life histories of followers of televangelist Pat Robertson shows how people of a more protestant evangelical background, estranged from their rural religious roots by upward social mobility, rediscovered their identities in a television personality who is both evangelical and socially of higher status. Many of the followers of Pat Robertson did not, in fact, watch the programs regularly, but they promoted the program among friends and generously gave money to continue the program because its presence on a public medium such as primetime television demonstrated that bible-belt, rural evangelical fundamentalism had finally gained an acceptable place at the center of American culture and society (Hoover, 1988). In general, people become loyal fans of a particular media personality or program not just because these are pleasurable but because they articulate the meaning of their existence and enrich their subcultural discourse.

Conclusions: Highlighting Some Lines of Research

Reception theory is currently attracting a great deal of interest in media studies, but its protagonists, like their subjects of audience ethnography, generally refuse to be locked into very tight, predictable categories. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest what I see as types of research that seem to be of more central interest and need.

The first is the analysis of the processes of interactive negotiation between media producers/entrepreneur and audiences to develop genres or new program styles that articulate a coherent promising research is the study of the role of discourse networks among audiences, especially followers of particular programs, media genres, media personalities and leaders of movements operating from a media base. A third valuable area is the analysis of historical development of genres through various media forms, how these

genres have helped to articulate a particular era and how the genre tradition gathers together central expressive tendencies of a collective cultural memory. For example, Martin-Barbero argues that, in Latin America, melodrama is a consistent expressive dimension of Latin American culture and that it is in melodramatic forms, such the telenovela, that popular aspirations, including political aspirations, find their first coherent expression (1987).

A characteristic of all three of these areas of research interest is that they tend to take producers and audience groups out of their artificially created isolation and see them as creating a culture through their interaction and struggle.

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