

## **Redeeming Mass Communications**

### **-brief history of modern media criticism-**

Communication research has frequently criticized its very object of study, that is, mass communications. One of the main targets for criticism has often been the commercial nature and purpose of the mass media. The discovery of advertising as a source of financial support for radio and later television broadcasting certainly shaped the contents of these media as well as the way we think about them today. The diffusion and expansion that both mass media and advertising experienced over the years raised important questions about the relationship between mass media and the public, which eventually gave birth to the “normative” and “critical” branches of mass communications research.

The first signs of concern and fear about the effects of mass media on society date back to the studies about the power of propaganda in World War I, but it was in the 1930s, after the impressive rise of Bolshevism, Fascism and Nazism, that the role of mass media in modern societies started being questioned as a potential threat to democracy and individual freedom. Especially the Nazi dictatorship impressed intellectuals for its totalitarian control over every aspect of social life and the extremely manipulative use of propaganda. [Purcell, pp. 117-138]

In 1944, on the wake of these events, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote Dialectic of Enlightenment, a theoretical critical analysis of contemporary society. One of the chapters of the book is titled “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment and Mass Deception”. This essay seems to be built around two major concerns for the future of modern societies, both of them involving some forms of “mass deception”. First of all, the extraordinary success of irrational dictatorships such as the Nazi; secondly, the process of vulgarization that culture was experiencing under the effect of the commercial pressures of the entertainment industry. Both of these phenomena involved mass communications. The media were seen as the channels through which these two forms of mass deception were achieved. Propaganda degenerated politics by instilling false ideas in the people's minds, whereas the commodification of arts and culture deprived humans of the most valuable way to give their lives a meaning and to pursue happiness.

Adorno and Horkheimer describe the mass communications system as uniform, alienating, generalizing, and ideologically biased. "Culture now impresses the same stamp on everything. Film, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform in every part." [Adorno and Horkheimer, p. 120] This uniform apparatus acts on weak members of atomized and alienated societies, producing a surrogate image of the world and a surrogate identity for every individual. In this context, "no scope is left for the imagination" [p. 127] and people are fed with meaningless pleasures that further deprive them of their creativity and capability of criticism. "Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown. Basically it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance. The liberation which amusement promises is freedom from thought and from negation." [p.145] Thus, the individual is constructed as a member of a series of groups with little, if any, personal identity outside of them. "In the culture industry the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of production. He is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned. [...] The peculiarity of the self is a monopoly commodity determined by society; it is falsely represented as natural." [p. 154]

Little wonder that room was left for mass deception in a society deprived of its most important values - that is, cultural diversity, personal independence, spontaneity, creativity - all of which find their natural expression in "high" arts and culture. Words lose their original value and become labels with no relation to what they mean, thus turning into easy-to-use propaganda and commercial tools. Individuals are left alone in front of powerful messages designed to subjugate them, and under this respect there seems to be little difference between Nazi propaganda and apparently innocuous commercials:

When the German Fascists decide one day to launch a word - say, "intolerable" - over the loudspeakers the next day the whole nation is saying "intolerable". [...] The general repetition of names for measures to be taken by the authorities make them, so to speak, familiar, just as the brand name on everybody's lips increased the sales in the era of the free market. The blind and rapidly spreading repetition of words with special designations links advertising with the totalitarian watchword. The layer of experience which created the words for their speakers has been removed. [...] Innumerable people use words and expressions which they have either ceased to understand or employ only because they trigger off conditional reflexes. [pp. 165-166]

Any message that is transmitted through mass media acquires some sort of self-evidence and settles down into the people's minds through constant, obsessive repetition. "The National Socialists knew that the wireless gave shape to their cause just as the printing press did to the Reformation. The metaphysical charisma of the Führer invented by the sociology of religion has finally turned out to be no more than the omnipresence of his

speeches in the radio, which are a demoniacal parody of the omnipresence of the divine spirit. The gigantic fact that the speech penetrates everywhere replaces its content. [...] No listener can grasp its true meaning any longer, while the Führer's speech is lies anyway. The inherent tendency of radio is to make the speaker's word, the false commandment, absolute." [p. 159]

The failure of Paul Lazarsfeld's attempts to attract Adorno to the "mainstream" field of research is a sign of the unbridgeable gap that separated the "critical" stream of research from the "administrative", which was led and coordinated by Lazarsfeld himself. Whereas Adorno believed that his research was simply asking questions about issues that the mainstream field just took for granted, an essay by Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, written in 1948, reveals several points of contact between the mainstream and the critical school.

"Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Social Action" addresses various issues concerning the social role of the media, including their power of conferring status and of enforcing social norms. The most interesting part of the essay, however, deals with the relationship between mass media ownership, media contents and social control.

Since the mass media are supported by great business concerns, geared into the social and economic system, the media contribute to the maintenance of that system. [...] To the extent that the media of mass communication have had an influence upon their audiences, it has stemmed not only from what is said, but more significantly from what is not said. For these media not only continue to affirm the *status quo* but, in the same measure, they fail to raise essential questions about the structure of society. Hence by leading toward conformism and by providing little basis for a critical appraisal of society, the commercially sponsored mass media indirectly but effectively retrain the cogent development of a genuinely critical outlook. [Lazarsfeld and Merton, p.107]

Social objectives are consistently surrendered by commercialized media, when they clash with economic gains. Minor tokens of "progressive" views are of slight importance since they are included only by grace of the sponsors and only on the condition that they be sufficiently acceptable as not to alienate any appreciable part of the audience. Economic pressure makes for conformism by omission of sensitive issues. [p. 108]

However, when it comes to defining an agenda for communications research and to draw an initial, temporary balance of the present knowledge about the power of mass media, Lazarsfeld and Merton seem to be already oriented toward a "minimal effects" paradigm. The idea that mass media have an autonomous and undisputed power over society must be countered: "It is not unlikely that the invention of the automobile and its development into a mass owned commodity has had a significantly greater effect upon society than the invention of the radio and its development into a medium of mass communication." [p.99]

The question that should be asked is: what did Lazarsfeld and Merton mean by “power”? In their essay they seem to be oriented to a definition of power as the ability to provoke changes in attitudes and behavior. They analyze the conditions that make a campaign successful and, since they find that all of them seldom occur at the same time, they conclude that “the present role of mass media is largely confined to peripheral social concerns and the media do not exhibit the degree of social power commonly attributed to them.” [p.117] Instead, the media appear to have some effectiveness in reinforcing existing attitudes and social trends: “The very conditions which make for the maximum effectiveness of the mass media of communication operate toward the maintenance of the going social and cultural structure rather than toward its change.” [p.119]

This, in sum, is the core of the “Weak Effects” paradigm, as is also revealed by key concepts such as the role of opinion leaders and the two-step flow of communication, both of which emerged from the two main works of this era, The People’s Choice and Personal Influence.

What is worth pointing out is the striking contrast between the first and the second part of Lazarsfeld and Merton’s essay, between their awareness of the effects of mass media in reducing criticism and preventing social change and their choice to direct their analysis toward an “administrative” field of research. Dan Schiller, in his Theorizing Communication, speaks it out quite clearly: “The contrast could not be more compelling between this – a balanced view of the ratio of coercion and consent which, as we will see, was also evident within the early critique of mass culture – and the agenda for research which immediately succeeded and supplanted it.” [D. Schiller, p.58] This agenda limited the field of research to short-term effects on individuals’ attitudes and behavior, mostly with the scope of improving performances of businesses and the government. Robert K. Merton admitted to that: “The categories of research have, until the recent past, been shaped not so much by the needs of sociological and psychological theory, as by the practical needs of those groups and agencies which have created the demand for audience research.” [quoted by Gitlin, p. 105]

After the establishment of a consistent, well-coordinated and generously financed mainstream field of communication research, it would take about twenty years before some genuinely “critical” contributions appear again. In the wake of the great expectations for social and political change generated by the 1968 movement and the birth of a “New Left”, a growing number of scholars began to regard the mainstream field of communications research as little more than a modern tool for businessmen and governments to increase social control and manipulation. Questions about the relationship between mass media and

the Public Good started being asked again after years of silence and the commercial nature of modern mass media was often considered a serious obstacle to the development of a more free, diverse and tolerant society. Herbert Marcuse in his One-dimensional Man emphasized the uniformity of social control and domination and the capitalistic system's ability to integrate and absorb all alternatives and all oppositions.

One of the legacies of the new political trend following 1968 and of the end of colonialism was to instill in communications scholars a new conscience of the worldwide scale of the phenomena they dealt with. Thus, increasing attention was paid to the situation of the "developing countries" and to their relationship with the Western world. If the relatively free and prosperous West was still plagued by domination and exploitation, if democracy was little more than a myth, if choosing between a Republican and a Democrat looked little different from choosing between two brands of cookies, then what should have been said about societies that were already economically dependent on Western capital and were being invaded by the Western mass culture through transnational media?

In 1971, Herbert I. Schiller directly addressed these questions in his Mass Communications and the American Empire. It was first of all necessary to acknowledge that a continuously increasing flow of contents was being directed from the United States to most countries both in the industrialized and in the developing world. Secondly, the nature of these contents had to be acknowledged as fully commercial and stranger to the audiences that they were to reach, thus being a potential threat to local and national cultures, languages, and identities. "The elaboration and the implementation of national developmental designs are imperiled by the extent to which incompatible values systems or inappropriate institutional forces are permitted to intrude themselves in the developing economy. The new cultural-ideological structures of an emergent nation are no less vulnerable to the glittering socio-cultural products of the already-developed world than the new industries of the aspiring states are to the established giant corporations of the industrialized West." [H. Schiller, p. 120] "The era of mechanized and centralized communication...has created a *Gleichschaltung* [enforced conformity] unprecedented in history. Everywhere local culture is facing submersion from the mass-produced outpourings of commercial broadcasting." [pp. 112-113] Moreover, the crucial role that transnational media have in "making the news" implies the possibility that an outstanding power of defining the social reality is completely concentrated in a few, Western hands.

Homologation, uniformity, suppression of differences: it almost looks like capital and mass media are turning every citizen of any country in the world into a "one-dimensional

man". Against this tide of conformism and domination, the only possible solution is to boost national cultural production in developing countries: "If there is a prospect that cultural diversity will survive anywhere on this planet, it depends largely on the willingness and ability of scores of weak countries to forego the cellophane-wrapped articles of the West's entertainment industries and persistently to develop, however much time it takes, their own broadcast material." [pp. 121-122]

In order to achieve these goals, however, mass media must be freed from the tight chains of commercialism. The laws of profit and capital do not respect any form of Public Good; rather, they keep on pushing the system toward increased transnationalization and vertical integration between different media and content providers. Moreover, this seemingly highly centralized system of communications exerts a tight control over the people's tastes: "Having formed and reinforced popular tastes according to its marketing needs, business turns around and justifies its offerings on the grounds of public demand." [pp.118-119] Commercial success, achieved by somehow meeting people's tastes, by "giving the people what they want", does not redeem all the media system from the charge of manipulation and exploitation, especially with reference to developing countries that dramatically lack resources for satisfying primary needs and cannot afford to be turned into consumerist and commercialized societies.

Herbert Schiller's argument rests on the idea that the mass media have the power to shape cultures and national identities, and that the messages that come from transnational media, especially television, are quite uniform and effective. He also seems to imply that citizens of developing countries lack key cultural resources to "resist" this flow of communication and to protect themselves from homologation and alienation. Schiller quotes a passage from Frantz Fanon about media's negative influence on children that is worth recalling:

Young people have at their disposition leisure occupations designed for the youth of capitalist countries: detective novels, penny-in-the-slot machines, sexy photographs, pornographic literature, films banned to those under sixteen, and above all alcohol. In the West, the family circle, the effects of education and the relatively high standard of living of the working class provide a more or less efficient protection against the harmful action of these pastimes. But in an African country, where mental development is uneven, where the violent collision of two worlds has considerably shaken old traditions and thrown the universe of the perception out of focus, the impressionability and sensibility of the young Africans are at the mercy of the various assaults made upon them by the very nature of Western culture. His family very often proves itself incapable of showing stability and homogeneity when faced with such attacks. [pp. 117-118]

Herbert Schiller turned communications research towards an unusual direction, way outside the chorus of administrative research, signaling that the time had come for scholars to start addressing these problematic issues: “The question before us is the shape of the world we wish to inhabit. The international means still exist, but do we have the will and the energy to resist technology’s thrust, abetted by commerce’s interest, toward global homogenization?” [p. 125]

These relatively new concerns clearly called for a redefinition of the field of communication research. Room had to be made for a new, more critical approach through which it would be possible to take into account the relationship between mass media and social change – including, obviously, the possibility that mass media impede social change. The commercial nature of mass media, together with their increasing transnational character, was to be considered not as an unproblematic acquisition from the past, but as a force shaping society, if not as a potential threat to it.

In an article written in 1978, Todd Gitlin, a young professor at the University of California, Berkeley, pronounced the clearest and loudest critique of the administrative dominant paradigm that had ever been seen. By focusing exclusively on short-term changes in attitude measured on single individuals, the mainstream research had failed to reveal more important long-term effects of the mass media on the whole society. “The dominant paradigm in media sociology...has drained attention from the power of the media to define normal and abnormal social and political activity, to say what is politically real and legitimate and what is not; to justify the two-party political structure; to establish certain political agendas for social attention and to contain, channel, and exclude others; and to shape the image of opposition movements. By its methodology, media sociology has highlighted the recalcitrance of audiences, their resistance to media-generated messages, and not their dependence, their acquiescence, their gullibility. It has looked to ‘effects’ of broadcast programming in a superficially behaviorist fashion, defining ‘effects’ so narrowly, microscopically and directly as to make it very likely that survey studies could show only slight effects at most.” [Gitlin, pp. 3-4]

Gitlin’s main critique is directed against the concept of “reinforcement”, which underlies most mainstream patterns of explanation and that, as we have seen, had clearly been expressed by Lazarsfeld and Merton in 1948. However, while the Weak Effects advocates had always relied on the concept of reinforcement as a proof that mass media do not hold any meaningful power over society and should therefore not be treated as potentially dangerous and oppressive, Gitlin saw reinforcement as an active rather than a

passive factor, that leaves criticism out of breath and thus contributes to the conservation of the social order.

Yet reinforcement of opinion is an indispensable link between attitudes and actions. If media 'only' reinforce 'existing opinions', they may well be readying action, or anchoring opinion in newly routine behavior. Moreover, 'reinforcement' can be understood as the crucial solidifying of attitude into ideology, a relatively enduring configuration of consciousness which importantly determines how people may perceive and respond to new situations. But 'ideology' and 'consciousness' are concepts that fall through the sieves of both behaviorism and stimulus-response psychology. They have no ontological standing in the constraining conceptual world of mainstream media research. [p. 84]

New questions and new concerns require an approach that is different from the administrative: "When I say that Lazarsfeld's point of view is administrative, I mean that in general it poses questions from the vantage of the command-posts of institutions that seek to improve or rationalize their control over social sectors in social functions. [...] The administrative theorist is not concerned with the corporate structure of ownership and control at all, or with the corporate criteria for media content that follow from it: he or she begins with the existing order and considers the effects of a certain use of it." [p. 93] The role of the researcher in this environment is not of questioning and criticizing, but of bargaining and reconciling: "The administrative mentality, in sum, is a bargaining mentality, desiring harmonious relations among the commanding institutions, within a common, hegemonic ideological frame: in this case, that established through the legitimacy of a commercial culture industry." [p. 101]

Sociology and communication research have to get out of the "command-posts" of commercial and government institutions and return to "the people". "A counter-paradigm could scrutinize the 'culture industry' as both social control and failed, muddled, privatized revolt against the exploitative conditions of work and family in the world of organized capitalism. [...] It could look at the consequences of broadcasting not only for individuals but for collective formations like social movements. [...] Beginning with a sense of political structure, a media sociology could work toward what David Morley has called an 'ethnography of audiences', showing how distinct class, ethnic, age and other audiences distinctly 'decode' (and ignore, and assimilate) the patterns in media messages over time." [p. 107]

It is quite meaningful that, when Gitlin proposes a new agenda and, consequently, a new methodology for research, he mentions David Morley's idea of an "ethnography of audiences", which Morley later developed into a complex study of the TV program *Nationwide* which examined both production practices and audience response.



David Morley's work is one of the hallmarks of a new, fertile field of research that was born in the 1960s and mostly developed, at least in its early ages, in the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. This school of research, soon known as British Cultural Studies, distinguished itself from the mainstream for two main aspects.

First of all, its orientation was explicitly critical, akin to "New Left" political positions and mostly influenced by the theory of "hegemony" as Antonio Gramsci defined it in his Prison Notebooks. Gramsci thought that in late capitalist societies violence and repression were not the only means that the "power-bloc" could employ to affirm and confirm its dominance. The dominant classes exercised a certain intellectual and spiritual leadership through which "the people" were persuaded and constantly reassured that the present order was the best possible. The role of intellectuals, Gramsci claimed, was by no means free from the coalitions of power that struggled for hegemony. This is why all intellectuals were to be called "organic intellectuals". Culture and intellectual work were thus to be considered as another *locus* in which the political struggle could be fought. Consequently, Cultural Studies scholars conceived their role as that of the new "organic intellectuals" of the emerging working class. The academic activity was understood by most of them as a pre-condition for political action in the struggle for social change. They were therefore little interested in occupying key positions in media companies or in advising politicians and government institutions. They shared most of Gitlin's concerns about the necessity of a research in communications that was really independent from the centers of media power.

Secondly, the British Cultural Studies added some remarkable concepts and insights to the toolkit of mass communications research. Drawing from literary theory and the newly developed discipline of semiotics, these scholars called for a new approach to mass media that emphasized previously-overlooked aspects such as the open nature of all texts, the variety of codes and modes of reading, the audience's freedom from rules of interpretation, and the unavoidable polysemy of popular texts.

The combination of the concept of culture as a battlefield for power in modern society – in contrast with the classical Marxist base-superstructure relationship [see Williams] – and of the theorization of popular texts as open texts produced a complete political project based on the belief that subjugated classes can oppose and resist ideologically-devised contents. Instead of causing alienation and limiting criticism, the mass media were thus seen as terrains of fight where the "alternative" always had a chance to prevail on the "dominant."

This new way of understanding mass communication as a complex discourse instead of a simple, unified and unifying process was possible only because a crucial theoretical step had been made. From the production-oriented administrative paradigm, researchers shifted

to an approach that focused more on reception and its complexity. In this respect, Cultural Studies represent a valid accomplishment of one of Gitlin's main proposals. In 1948, Lazarsfeld and Merton concluded that the media's power had been overestimated, and that other factors were to be considered. In 1955 Katz and Lazarsfeld emphasized the importance of social relationships in the reception of mass media contents, thus underscoring an often-overlooked limit to mass media's power of influencing audiences. The mainstream field of communications had already reached conclusions that partially echoed those of Cultural Studies – in short, that mass communications are not as efficient and powerful as is usually assumed – but they had failed to interpret these findings from a critical point of view.

The main contributor to the establishment and the coordination of the British Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall theorized the disparity of codes, and thus of interpretations, as the characteristic feature of mass communication.

Hall calls for a rethinking of the well-known Information Theory model, devised by Claude Shannon in 1949. In this model, a Sender transmits a Message to a Receiver through a Channel. A Code allows the two actors to distinguish meaning from noise. The moments of Encoding and Decoding used to be conceived as two complementary events, one mirroring the other, since no disparities of Code were considered. The Receiver's task was to decode the Message using the same Code as the Sender. It was not the first time that the Information Theory model was employed in the study of mass communications [see Peters, pp. 23-24], but the innovation introduced by Hall was crucial: the Code was not to be considered as totally, once-and-for-all shared by the Sender and the Receiver, nor was it defined and maintained exclusively by the Sender or by some external authority. Different Codes can be employed in decoding any Message, and it is therefore through alternative Codes that alternative readings can occur: "The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degree of symmetry – that is, the degree of 'understanding' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange – depends on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the 'personifications', encoder-producer and decoder-receiver. But this in turn depends on the degrees of identity/non-identity between the codes which perfectly or imperfectly transmit, interrupt or systematically distort what has been transmitted." [Hall, p. 131]

This does not mean that all codes are equivalent, or that there is not such a thing as a dominant code through which ideological readings of texts are possible. As Gramsci would put it, the "power-bloc" constantly works to affirm its own code.

Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested. [p.124]

The definition of a hegemonic viewpoint is (a) that it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings, of a whole sector of relations in a society or culture; and (b) that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy – it appears coterminous with what is “natural”, “inevitable”, “taken for granted” about the social order. [p. 137]

The hegemonic code has many and powerful means to impose itself against alternative codes. One of them is through the operators of mass media, who act on the basis of “professional codes” which “serve to reproduce hegemonic definitions specifically by *not overtly* biasing their operations in a dominant direction; ideological reproduction therefore takes place here inadvertently, unconsciously, ‘behind men’s backs’.” [p. 137] However, “We say *dominant*, not ‘determined’, because it is always possible to order, classify, assign and decode an event within more than one ‘mapping’.” [p. 134]

Disparities of codes, often the result of an overt opposition to the dominant meanings, make mass communication often “ineffective” from an administrative point of view.

Television producers who find their message ‘failing to get across’ are frequently concerned to straighten out the kinks in the communication chain, thus facilitating the ‘effectiveness’ of their communication. Much research which claims the objectivity of ‘policy-oriented analysis’ reproduces the administrative goal by attempting to discover how much of a message the audience recalls and to improve the extent of understanding. [...] But more often broadcasters are concerned that the audience has failed to take the meaning as they – the broadcasters – intended. What they really mean to say is that viewers are not operating within the ‘dominant’ or ‘preferred’ code. Their ideal is ‘perfectly transparent communication’. Instead, what they have to confront is ‘systematically distorted communication’. [p. 135]

For Hall and for all the scholars of Cultural Studies, inefficiency in mass communication is not a defect that an adequate marketing or broadcasting policy should repair, but a missing link in the chain of domination, a ready-to-conquer spot in the battlefield for cultural and social power, a blank space that the hegemonic forces cannot help but leave to opposing groups to fill out with *their own* meanings.

Hall proposes a schematic and simplified model of three possible codes that can guide the readings of hegemonic texts. The hegemonic code fully accepts the schemes and the worldviews that are imposed by the dominant culture. The negotiated code does not question the legitimacy of the hegemonic code, but fails to acknowledge the hegemonic meaning inscribed in a specific message in a particular, practical situation, thus working as an exception to a rule that is still not disputed. Finally, the oppositional reading is activated by an audience that overtly delegitimizes the source of the message as biased and representative of the interests of the dominant class.

Whereas negotiated readings are quite usual and accepted in modern capitalist societies, it is through oppositional readings that alternative groups can undermine the basis of capitalist control and therefore impose their own meanings and worldviews. Popular culture is the arena where competing meanings struggle to survive and thus to impose the hegemony of one or another class. "One of the most significant political moments (they also coincide with crisis points within the broadcasting organizations themselves, for obvious reasons) is the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here the 'politics of signification' – the struggle in discourse – is joined." [p. 138]

Along the lines of Stuart Hall's idea of oppositional readings as political acts goes John Fiske, who also believes that in modern societies the political struggle must be primarily based on culture and meanings. "The textual struggle for meaning is the precise equivalent of the social struggle for power." [Fiske 1986, p.302] "Meanings are the most important parts of our social structure, and are potentially the main origin of any impetus to change it." [p. 405]

Fiske bases his approach on insights coming from semiotics, especially Umberto Eco's theory of popular texts as "open texts". In his book Opera Aperta, written in 1962, Eco claims that every text in the era of mass communications is subject to what Charles S. Peirce called "unlimited semiosis", that is, an unstoppable and uncontrollable flow of interpretations that every act of communication provokes. Akin to hermeneutics, this field of studies emphasizes the volatility of meanings and the never-ending process of negotiation that invests contents in the social discourse. The theory of deconstructionism is another point of reference for Fiske: "Deconstruction asserts the instability of all meaning, and thus denies the possibility of preferred meanings being structured into the text with any degree of clarity." [p. 400]

From these premises follows that every text is destined to polysemy, that is, it can be subject to different interpretations and generate different meanings. What Fiske mostly emphasizes, however, is that this is even more true for television, which is the popular medium by excellence: "In order to be popular, television must reach a wide diversity of audiences, and, to be chosen by them, must be an open text that allows different subcultures to generate meanings from it that meet the needs of their own subcultural identities. It must therefore be polysemic." [p. 392]

Fiske is well aware, as Hall was, that a dominant power shapes mass communications and distributes preferred codes and meanings. There is a clear link between

author and authority and the attempt of the author to establish his/her hegemony over meanings parallels the practice of social control by dominant classes. The hegemonic meaning often prevails, and the mechanism through which this happens is not conceptually different from that theorized by Adorno and Horkheimer: "The reader...is invited to cooperate with the text, to decode it according to codes that fit easily with those of the dominant ideology, and if one accepts the invitation, is rewarded with pleasure. The pleasure is the pleasure of recognition, of privileged knowledge and of dominant specularly, and it produces a subject position that fits into the dominant cultural system with a minimum of strain." [p. 403]

On the other hand, texts in the era of mass communications need to reach audiences as wide as possible, and in order to do so they have to be open to any kind of interpretation. It must be pointed out that media content producers are well aware of this trade-off between what Adorno and Horkheimer called "uniformity" and what Fiske calls "popularity". Studies of programs production and of campaigns reveal that most of the time the winning strategy is to "let the people get what they want" from the message. In his book titled Film/Genre, Rick Altman shows that genres are not stable categories and that movie producers mostly rely on genre mixing in order to attract wider segments of audiences. The rationale in media production is often based on the combination of heterogeneous elements rather than uniformity and bold coherence. A consequence of such "popularity" is that space is created for alternative interpretations. "Semiotic excess" is the property of a text to leave a certain amount of space to the audience's interpretations: The theory of semiotic excess proposes that "once the ideological, hegemonic work has been performed, there is still excess meaning that escapes the control of the dominant and is thus available for the culturally subordinate to use for their own cultural-political interests. [...] The dominant and the oppositional are simultaneously present in both the text and its reading." [p. 403]

Fiske's belief in the possibility of a "social struggle for meaning" also stems from a complete rethinking of the role of "the people" in the dynamics of mass communications. Perspectives such as that of the School of Frankfurt can prove useful to evaluate and discover the ideological meanings inscribed in popular texts, but boldly underestimate the audiences' ability to counter "mass deception". Fiske quotes Stuart Hall to point out that "the people" should not be conceptualized as "cultural dopes", as passive subjects that are easily forced to accept ideological readings. The variety of social experiences and cultures that can be found among "the people" is a rich source of different codes and independent interpretations of these messages.

Whereas Adorno and Horkheimer described the field of culture as dominated by the forces of economy and propaganda, Fiske rejects the idea that culture can be at the mercy of any kind of external authority: “The attempt to produce a culture for others, whether that otherness be defined in terms of class, gender, race, nation, or whatever, can never be finally successful, for culture can only be produced from within, not from without. In a mass society the materials and meaning systems out of which cultures are made will almost inevitably be produced by the cultural industries; but the making of these materials into culture, that is, into the meanings of self and of social relations, and the exchange of these materials for pleasure is a process that can only be performed by their consumer-users, not by their producers.” [Fiske 1987, p. 323]

Fiske regards these theoretical findings as a starting point for new political action. “The Politics of Reading” calls for an engagement of intellectuals in order to stimulate oppositional interpretations and to promote cultural diversities as the primary source of resistance to hegemonic meanings.

If we are to resist the centralization of meaning, if we are to preserve the subcultures and alternative cultures that serve the interests of the people and whose differences form the only possible source of social change, then a socially motivated deconstructive critical and teaching practice is essential. It is this practice that can explain and legitimate the ability of the subordinate to take the signifying practices and products of the dominant, to use them for different social purposes, and to return them from where they came, stripped of their hegemonic powers. [Fiske 1986, p. 406]

In 1967, some twenty years before Fiske, Umberto Eco had defined this new intellectual enterprise in the battlefield for meanings as “semiological guerrilla”. Eco was mostly referring to the then popular practice of “counter-information”, but his proposal can be read as an early hypothesis of political use of communication from the point of view of oppositional groups:

We have to occupy, in every place in the world, the first chair in front of every television set (and naturally: the chair of the group leader in front of every movie screen, every transistor, every newspaper page). If you want a less paradoxical formulation, I will say: The battle for the survival of Man as a responsible being in the Communications Era will not be won where the communication starts, but where it arrives. I have talked about guerrilla because a paradoxical and difficult destiny is waiting for us – I am talking about scientists and theorists of communications. Now that the communication systems are projecting a single, industrialized Source and a single message which will reach a dispersed audience all around the world, we will have to imagine complementary communication systems that allow us to reach every single human group, every single member of the universal audience, in order to discuss the incoming message in light of the receivers’ codes, comparing them with those of the senders. [...] The universe of technological communications would thus be populated by soldiers of the communication guerrilla, who would re-introduce a critical dimension in the passive reception. The threat that ‘the medium is the message’ could thus become, in front of the medium and the message, a comeback to individual responsibility. [Eco 1973, pp. 297-298]

Thus, both the concepts of mass media and audience were redefined. The mass media were conceived as open texts and battlefields for meaning; the audiences had been redefined as active, at least partially and potentially independent from hegemonic codes, and capable of creating their own meanings. These two new theoretical frameworks all made up for a much different overall evaluation of the social impact of mass communications.

It is almost ironic that the one of the scholars whose approach and research agenda most fitted those proposed by Todd Gitlin in 1978, finally disconfirmed Gitlin's main argument: "Far from being the agent of the dominant classes, [television] is the prime site where the dominant have to recognize the insecurity of their power, and where they have to encourage cultural difference with all the threat to their own position that this implies." [Fiske 1987, p. 326] Gitlin's main complaint against mainstream research was that it had highlighted "the recalcitrance of audiences, their resistance to media-generated messages, and not their dependence, their acquiescence, their gullibility." Stuart Hall and John Fiske depict audiences as recalcitrant, capable of resistance to ideology, and not necessarily acquiescent and gullible. The crucial innovation in the history of communication research that these findings generated is the concept of audiences as a potential counter-power to broadcasters and of communication as a matter of negotiation, often involving power, rather than efficiency and symmetry between transmission and reception, as both the administrative research and the former critical theories used to conceive it.

It is a mere fact, though, that this approach might appear as an optimistic redemption of commercialism and mass communications in general. In his 1987 book Television Culture, John Fiske claims that "The financial economy attempts to use television as an agent of homogenization; for it television is centered, singular in its functionality, and is located in its center of production and distribution. In the cultural economy, however, television is entirely different. It is decentered, diverse, located in the multiplicity of its modes and moments of reception. Television is the plurality of its reading practices, the democracy of its pleasures, and it can only be understood in its fragments. It promotes and provokes a network of resistances to its own power whose attempt to homogenize and hegemonize breaks down on the instability and multiplicity of its meanings and pleasures." [Fiske 1987, p. 324] Thus, television is seen as a democratic rather than despotic and deceptive medium. It is the audiences, if any, who actually succeed in some kind of "deception" of television, by ignoring hegemonic meanings or by turning them upside-down in oppositional readings. Moreover, television turns out to be democratic and viable to the masses not despite its commercial

nature, but *because of it*, that is, because of the producers' and advertisers' need to reach wide audiences and let them play a part in the definition of meaning.

In the same book, Fiske also addresses some of the questions that Herbert Schiller had posed about the role of US-produced television and Americanized entertainment industry in the international arena: "Hollywood, and, to a lesser extent, Europe, may dominate the international flow of both news and entertainment programming, yet there is little evidence of a global surge of popularity for the western nations and their values. The domination in the economic domain may not necessarily produce the equivalent domination in the cultural." [p. 320] Fiske mentions Katz and Liebes's audience study of *Dallas*, which demonstrated that, especially for foreign audiences, "consuming the program did not necessarily involve consuming the ideology." [p. 320] Some pages later he writes: "In the sphere of a 'national' culture, it may be that *Miami Vice* is more 'Australian' than a mini-series that sets out to document and celebrate a specific movement in Australian history." [p. 323] Because meaning is produced at both ends of the encoding/decoding chain, no certain predictions can be made as to what effects some programs will have on their national culture, let alone when these programs are aired in foreign countries where audiences employ different codes of interpretation. Again, from these theories it seems to follow that transnational media should not be considered a threat for the developing countries, at least as far as culture is concerned, and that their effect is to be considered as a function of what the citizens of these countries decide to make them of.

Are these answers as appropriate and compelling as the questions that former mass communications critics had posed in the previous decades? The risk is that these theorizations of mass communication as intrinsically decentralized and impossible to monopolize, originally conceived as the first pillar of a project of organized resistance through communications – let it be called "struggle for discourse", "politics of reading", or "semiological guerrilla" – turn out to be read as a substantial redemption of the mass media from the critiques and suspects that had stratified over the previous five decades. Here I will just mention two remarks that stress this point.

"The social struggle for meaning" – this is again Fiske – "is the precise equivalent of the social struggle for power." Really? Must homeless men, covertly inserting *Hustler* within the cover of *Life* magazine so as to deceive censorious overseers, be reckoned on this count as taking their places in a battle against the dominative social policies that lead to their search for shelter in their first place? A parallel slippage figured in those theories of colonial discourse for which resistance to the power of empire, itself already transmuted into a regularly relied form, "orientalism," likewise occurred pre-eminently via textual strategies - indeed, in one witty formulation, by the phrase "the empire writes back." [D. Schiller, p. 160]



The view of cultural creativity highlights consumption as an active social practice and relegates exchange and commodity relations to the background. What we see is the excess of signs, not the conditions of production, distribution and exchange which make them available. The effect, ironically, is to replicate that view of capitalism which capitalism would most like us to see; the richness of the market-place and the freely choosing consumer. The other side - the structures of production and the inequalities of access to the market-place - are missing, and these absences emphasize the “free-floating” quality of the sign, making it available for any use of meaning that may be attached to it. [Clarke, quoted by D. Schiller, p. 194]

Hall and Fiske’s orientations seem to be quite consistent with several aspects of postmodern theory. Postmodernists recognize the importance of culture as the result of the dynamics of commodification and of the general state of prosperity enjoyed by the industrialized countries, both of which increase the importance of symbolic over exchange values as the criterion based on which goods are produced and evaluated. But the increasing importance of culture is accompanied by a growing skepticism for “the great metanarratives” and by the consciousness of the variety of cultures and living worlds, none of which can demand an exclusive and more legitimate status anymore. Thus, culture fails to provide definite, stable meanings and frameworks of interpretation for individuals, but at the same time a vacuum is created in which other meanings and other groups can play a part and spread their messages. Some of the emblematic oppositions between modernity and postmodernity that David Harvey lays out, referring to a work by Hassan, are quite consistent with Fiske’s findings [Harvey, p. 43]:

| <b><i>Modernism</i></b>         | <b><i>Postmodernism</i></b>          |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Hierarchy                       | Anarchy                              |
| Distance                        | Participation                        |
| Creation/Totalization/Synthesis | Decreation/Deconstruction/Antithesis |
| Centring                        | Dispersal                            |
| Genre/Boundary                  | Text/Intertext                       |
| Selection                       | Combination                          |
| Interpretation/Reading          | Against interpretation/Misreading    |
| Signified                       | Signifier                            |
| Lisible (readerly)              | Scriptable (writerly)                |
| Master code                     | Idiolect                             |
| Determinacy                     | Indeterminacy                        |

Whatever the judgment of Cultural Studies’ contribution to a critical approach to mass communications, there are evident signs that these approaches have been influential in the development of postmodern thought. Dan Schiller’s reference to Orientalism as a way of conceptualizing conflict akin to the theory of cultural hegemony is another sign of this link.

If the last generation of mass communications research has favored a substantial, but not uncritical, redemption of commercial mass media, the latest developments in the scenario of mass communications raise questions as to whether this redemption might be a temporary or a long-lasting one.

The idea of mass communications as a way of sending uniform messages to a wide, possibly worldwide, and homogenous audience has been repeatedly and convincingly demythologized over the last fifty years, Mc Luhan notwithstanding. The Sender-Receiver (Encoder-Decoder) model has been deconstructed in two different ways at its two ends. Whereas Fiske, Hall and theorists of postmodernism proclaimed the end of mass communications on the Receiver/Decoder's end, underscoring the instability of meanings and the unlimited variety of interpretations that audiences can activate, the evolution of the economy of the media, largely influenced by the latest developments in communications technologies, seems to be about to sanction the end of mass communications on the Sender/Encoder's end. Two main trends are contributing to this development.

First of all, a multiplication of media outlets and program contents occurred as the result of the improvement of technologies of broadcasting – especially in television - and the development of innovative commercial strategies based on “targeting” small, particularly valuable groups instead of wide, generic aggregates. Whereas television used to be general in its purposes and its audience of reference, its evolution is gradually transforming it in a multi-faceted medium, which provides such a varied and segmented supply that even calls into question whether we should still employ the word “television” as referring to a single, unified concept in the study of media. A similar trend has been observed for a long time in other media, such as magazines and radio, while other sectors are still based on the attempt to produce “blockbuster” hits that help financing all the system through a “spillover effect”. Such is the case for the movie and the music recording industries, as well as for book publishing. However, if television comprises the center of the contemporary media system, evolutions in this sector must be granted a special attention by the study of communications.

The second aspect of the recent evolution of the mass communications environment is a tendency by the media conglomerates to focus on high-income households and businesses instead of the generality of customers. This means that an increasing amount of resources is being dragged from investments in the “mass” market and redirected to satisfy a narrow range of more “valuable” customers. A clear example of this trend is observed in the telephone market, where companies are gradually abandoning customers that cannot afford – or do not want to purchase – mobile phones and advanced communication services, such as Internet connection through dedicated lines. The quality of the so-called POTS (Plain Old

Telephone Services) is decreasing to the point that in the first six months of 1995 one quarter of large companies' customers reported complaints about either service quality or fairness of billing. It is also quite telling that the most successful services that are being sold on the Internet involve financial information and advising, and indeed there are still great inequalities in the diffusion of Internet access. The real problem with the "digital divide" is that there are large disparities not only between who can and who cannot access innovative services, but also, and more remarkably, between those who have the power to define what contents are produced and to whom they are destined and those who do not have this power.

What are the possible consequences of these trends for the study of communication? If the environment of mass communications, which is unavoidably shaped by economic and political as well as social forces, keeps following the trends that have been outlined, a rethinking of the current paradigms must be attempted.

In his Television Culture, written in 1987, John Fiske acknowledges the tendency toward an increased differentiation of programs and, quite consistently with his theoretical background, claims that narrowcasting and audience segmentation for commercial purposes might well reduce the audience's freedom to generate meanings:

Paradoxically, diversity of readings may best be stimulated by a greater homogeneity of programming. A widely distributed single program, such as *Dallas*, whose openness makes it a producerly text, may not be such an agent of homogenization as it appears, for to reach its multitude of diverse audiences it must allow for a great deal of cultural diversity in its readings, and must thus provide considerable semiotic excess for the receiving subcultures to negotiate with in order to produce *their* meanings, rather than the ones preferred by the broadcasters. [...]

A diversity of programs is a diversity that is deliberately constructed by television producers and schedulers in an attempt to segment the audience into the markets required by advertisers, which may or may not coincide with the subcultural formations constructed by the people. A greater variety of closed, readerly texts that impose their meanings more imperialistically and that deliver market segments to advertisers may not be as socially desirable as a narrower range of more open texts, where the diversity is a function of the people rather than of the producers. [...]

*Dallas*, for all its apparent homogeneity, may well be a more diversified program than the variety of offerings of such multiple special-interest channels, and in so far as its diversification is audience-produced rather than centrally produced, it is, I argue, more likely to maintain cultural differences and to produce subculturally specific meanings and pleasures." [Fiske 1987, pp. 319-320]

Fiske's analysis might be too much text-oriented, again consistently with his background. If we consider the two ends of our simplified communication model, Encoder/Sender and Decoder/Reader, the real threat to the possibility of alternative and

oppositional readings to hegemonic texts lies not only in the segmentation and diversification of contents, but also in the increasingly usual practice of classifying, segmenting and directly targeting definite chunks of the audience. This, in a School-of-Frankfurt-wise interpretation, could be considered a reduction of consumers' freedom as a consequence of the increased efficiency of the mass media and of the commercial strategies that are realized through them. However, other, more optimistic readings of these developments are just as reasonable.

From Fiske's point of view, these trends will probably contribute to split the once-homogeneous mass audience in a number of more stratified and segmented groups. This means that the amorphous entity that Fiske calls "the people", whose generality and heterogeneous composition was considered as the primary reason of the "semiotic excess" in popular texts and as the source of the multiplicity of readings that every text can be invested of, is being transformed in a more organized and viable collection of smaller, interrelated social entities. Hall and Fiske were confident that "the people" would always maintain a degree of opacity to the eyes of the financial and commercial powers (the power-bloc, in Gramsci's terminology), and that this opacity could be reconsidered as a resource and as a strategy in the hands of opposing groups. What happens when the commercial and political elites start developing techniques that seem to be capable of seeing at least better, if not completely, through this opacity?

As for the systematic redirection of resources that is occurring in many sectors of the communication industry from a generic "mass" platform of consumers and audiences toward more profitable high-income households and businesses, it should be noted that one of the possible consequences could be a subtraction of contents and resources from the popular arena to more elitist markets. This does not obviously mean that in the future there will not be such a thing as a popular culture or a wide supply of popular texts. But if the new form of political struggle is based on meanings, and if culture is a battlefield, then it might be that in the future not all the aspects of culture will be accessible in the popular arena. According to Hall and Fiske, what makes the era of mass communication and mass culture ripe for a new form of political struggle is the retrievability of all kinds of texts to the widest audience. The years in which these theories were developed were characterized by a greater equality in access to the most important mass media than the present years. The subtraction of a substantial part of contents from "the people" might result in a restriction of the battlefield for hegemony and in a reduction of the resources that opposing group can rely on for their "politics of reading".

Whatever the final outcomes of these new developments, all text- and culture-oriented approaches will hardly be seen as clear and uncontroversial, always bouncing back and forth between genuine criticism of dominance as achieved through mass media and the suspect of providing a substantial redemption of the same phenomena.

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