

The Active Receiver

One of the great insights of cultural studies is that the receiver-reader-audience is active and productive of meaning. We have already seen how Stuart Hall developed an elegant three-part hypothetical range of the non-identity of encoding and decoding operations in relation to television programs. If we look at statements of this insight by John Fiske as prime examples, ((My initial focus is on Fiske's *Television Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989, but I then turn to several other of his books.)) it is for the sake of an appreciation of his refinement of Hall's work and the terms with which he constructed the receiver's activeness. The construction of such activeness is the subject of this concluding cyberlecture.

Fiske begins *Television Culture* by distinguishing two kinds of subjects: a textual, inactive and passive subject as opposed to an active, socially formed subject (the so-called "actual tv viewer" with a history). The former is passive because the text subjects, that is, subjugates, the reader to its ideological power (TC 66). The latter emerges, however, as productive of meaning through, for example, existing subject positions negotiating and grappling with those that the text prefers (TC 65). Fiske's point is that ethnographic methods applied to receivers temper semiotic tendencies to move directly from text to social structure, thus neglecting the contact points between a text's dominant meaning and a receiver's social situation. Hence, Fiske considered that method should be ethnosemiotic. ((See Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, Second Edition, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 161. "Ethno-semiotics links the reading of texts with the everyday lives of their readers." (162))) Ethnosemiotics is also political as senders and receivers are in Fiske's analysis in a relation of economic and social subordination and antagonistic resistance (the latter 'under' the former) by the subordinated (the latter releasing a text's

progressive potentiality, but there is no guarantee of this oppositionality). ((Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989, p. 167. Fiske writes: “There is no guarantee that the politics of any cultural form or practice will be mobilized in any particular reading, any oppositionality may remain ‘sleeping’ potential; and, if mobilized, there is equally no guarantee as to whether its direction will be progressive or conservative.”))

Like Hall, Fiske writes of “structures of preference” (cf. “structures of discourse in dominance”) that open certain meanings while simultaneously closing off others (which in Hall is the work of pre-ferring dominant meanings). Viewers-readers-receivers are active in the sense of “making [my emphasis] their own socially pertinent meanings out of the semiotic resources provided by television” (TC 65). This making is, as it was in the case of Hall’s work, carried forward with reference to a dialogical process (via Volosinov). The text’s message is “worked on” by a subject already full of contradictory and partial discourses and their ideological traces. Such making is sometimes a matter of shifting or bending meanings so that they connect with one’s social experience and situation in a way that helps to initiate personal and social changes. The making of meaning may be socially transformative by providing a piece of hitherto missing cultural capital (TC 75) by enabling one to participate in an exchange from/in which one was otherwise marginalized or excluded; indeed, ways of watching television – listening without viewing, sitting glued to the screen, occasionally glancing up from some other project – are “regimes of watching,” with social determinations that for Fiske contribute to this process of meaning construction.

Meaning is, then, constructed from the “conjuncture of the text with the socially situated reader.” (TC 80) The text is a “resource,” to use one of Fiske’s favorites expressions, with which a receiver works (extracting,

refining, turning, etc.). Working with semiotic resources is a participatory practice: productivity shaped by actuality. Resources are typically cultural commodities like tv shows, cds, clothes, tourist sites, etc. Such resources carry dominant meanings and interests to receivers but, importantly, they “must also carry contradictory lines of force.” ((Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989, p 2.)) What is it to be a non-resource? In Fiske’s work on popular culture, the implication is that a non-resource is a failed cultural commodity – failure meaning that it has not become or been made popular. Another way to understand this failure is that a resource’s potential is nil if it lacks characteristics that would allow for its actualization by receivers (i.e., it is too inflexible, closed, “nonproducerly”; an artifact’s popular potential may remain “asleep” for some time because the conditions for its productive reception do not yet exist). Fiske is theorizing from within Hall’s first position of decoding that operates within the preferred code, augmented by subtle professional codes, of the dominant-hegemonic position. Fiske’s active receivers are all subordinated by capitalist exchange relations. Such receivers are, however, said to “make do” in two ways: through tactical evasions (pleasure over meaning) or resistances (meaning over pleasure). Despite such subordination, active receivers engage in the “activation” (release and distribution) of a resource’s “potentialities” according to their relevance for everyday life (where text meets the social and the making becomes a “vital base” for redeployments of pleasure and power). The potential of a resource is very much a matter of “excess semiosis” that escapes hegemonic discipline. Fiske writes of a “producerly popular text” that “exposes, however reluctantly, the vulnerabilities, limitations, and weaknesses of its preferred meanings ... its meanings exceed its own power to discipline them... .” (UPC 104) The producerly popular text is undisciplined at the contact points between lines of social force and the texts in question: despite itself, then, the producerly text is a resource for the producerly receiver in the process making popular culture.

Such activity needs, then, to be accessed for study in some manner, and here we see a truly heterogeneous array of methods at play in cultural studies. Even here, though, the terms are far from straightforward. Take Ien Ang's work on *Dallas*. ((Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas*, London: Methuen, 1985.)) Ang takes the step of placing an advertisement asking for responses in writing. She acknowledges the gender bias of the selected channel, and situates herself among the *Dallas* viewers from whom she wants responses (which she reads symptomatically). Ang's own ambivalence (as an intellectual and feminist) about the show is also at issue. What she wants to understand is how the show gives viewers pleasure (the question of the receiver's pleasure – and pain – is an underappreciated organizing principle in its own right in cultural studies all the way from Barthes to Fiske and beyond).

Consider a further example. Henry Jenkins searches for the constraints of fan rewriting and reproducing of television shows and films such as *Star Trek*. ((See Henry Jenkins, "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching," in *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism and Science Fiction*, ed. Constance Penley et al, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.)) He finds, then, in a vast terrain of fanzines, conventions, and Web rings, that the activity of fan writing as reworking itself has debts to specific genres (this is most evident in women's creative recastings). Jenkins uncovers the semiotic constraints of rewriting practices (the borrowings – romantic, utopian, erotic – that themselves shape textual poaching operations or reaping what one has not sown). Activity is, then, socio-semiotically constrained, and it is the task of the ethnosemiotician to creatively uncover and analyze this complex factor.

This counterposing of cultural studies with a more rigid communication model in which the receiver plays the role of receiving a signal (an "inverse transmitter" in the language of Shannon and Weaver) and, given the hidden

technological determinations and power relations at play, reconstitutes the message and then gives it to the destination, has been a matter of concern for a wide variety of thinkers of communication working in quite different traditions. Marshall and Eric McLuhan, for instance, devoted a few pages to a critique of the Shannon-Weaver model on precisely the terms made famous by Hall and then Fiske: the assumption is that “communication is a kind of literal matching rather than resonant making.” ((Marshall and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988, p. 86ff.)) Hall underlined repeatedly that dominant didn’t mean determined, pointing to the non-identity of encoding and decoding. To borrow the terms used by the McLuhans, the Shannon-Weaver model is figure without ground; left hemisphere (quantity, precision) over right hemisphere (holistic, simultaneous); matching over making. The model embodies efficient causality – a force that is testable and controllable, without paying proper attention to the “side-effects” of communication, which it excludes, and in so doing misses the new ground or “environment” that emerges and shapes the experience of users, indeed, it transforms their worlds. For the McLuhans, communication is about making and interaction (“participation”), about freedom from fixity and rigidity. And the study of the “total situation” in which communication takes place, including residues of rational models, involves something quite in keeping with the investigation of sociosemiotic constraints – suggested in Eco’s expression of the receiver’s rediscovery of the freedom of decoding ((Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976, p. 150.)) – in cultural studies.

Like Fiske, the McLuhans consider almost any artifact to be amenable to the study of its transformative effects on users and grounds. But their construction of the receiver liberated from the “hardware model of information theory – “transportation of data from point to point” (111) – is in the service of a description of the sensory surround of the new electric environment of “tactile acoustic space.” In other words the McLuhans

announced a theory of perception that took making to mean that receivers were artists. Theirs was a poetics of adaptation and not a politics of (re)making.

Despite this significant and definitive gulf, I would further align Fiske and the McLuhans on the basis of their mutual interest in coping. For Fiske “the art of popular culture is the art of ‘making do’.” (RP 4) Throughout his career Marshall McLuhan sought refuge from fundamental socio-technological change in artistic strategies understood as coping mechanisms (artists create anti-environments or pen counterblasts that allow one to become aware of what is otherwise all but invisible, the environment presently structuring one’s experience). There is nothing new in this sense of the receiver as one who copes, however, for it was already present in the groundbreaking work of Richard Hoggart. According to Hoggart, working class people do a great deal of adjusting in the face of the onslaught of massification: “‘putting up with things’, not simply from a passivity but because that is where one starts from, from the expectation that one will have to put up with a lot; and the maintenance of the traditional corollary of this, to put up with things cheerfully.” ((Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1957, p. 270.))

Making do, coping, putting up with things: these are passively active responses to incoming messages that are distorted by the specific conditions and situations of receivers. I do not wish to criticize these closely related conceptions of a passive activeness of receivers (even a well-tempered activeness becomes suspiciously weak as it comes into contact with passivity; conversely, the proverbial grin and bear it or stiff upper lip are unbearably strong in their reproductions of class and gender codes). Rather, it seems to me that passive activity constitutes a sort of cunning. Cunning preserves; receivers endure. I am reminded here of the very early McLuhan text *The Mechanical Bride* in which the emphasis, while not

showing much interest in describing the strategies of coping of individuals within the “whirling phantasmagoria” of the commercial signscape, did proffer a quasi-critical position on the passivity of receivers of mass media through an appeal to Poe’s sailor who like McLuhan’s industrial man, observes the semiurgical swirling of the commercial culture in which he is embedded (sinking) in order to analyze it and ultimately save himself.

((Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*, Boston: Beacon, 1951, pp. v-vi.)) What McLuhan called strategies of individuals have been refigured by De Certeau, among others, as tactical maneuvers that apparatuses of repression tolerate (turn a blind eye, allow to operate in “dark corners”). In the end, receivers endure and persist, all the while remaining fragile yet mobile targets of innumerable messages.