

## TELEVISION STUDIES – OCW UC3M

### Topic VII. Television Audiences: Consumption and Fandom.

#### Outline:

This topic deals with television from the point of view of audience reception. The first part summarizes the main tools to study audiences quantitatively and qualitatively, and particularly the importance of rating systems in both the public service model (as a form of social legitimization) and the commercial model (as a mechanism for economic efficiency). The second part introduces the analysis of the television viewing experience and the processes of interpretation made by Cultural Studies, including the research conducted by David Morley and Charlotte Brundson, and looking at feminist and queer studies. The third part will discuss the ethnography of audiences and the importance of approaching the audience as an active subject of interpretation and identification with the television text. In this part we will use Len Ang's seminal work about *Dallas*. The fourth and final part will deal with the relevance of fan groups in contemporary television, and the relationship between fandom and concepts such as cult TV, appropriation and consumption. Henry Jenkins' contributions are especially useful to trace the evolution of fan communities from traditional TV to the emergence of new technologies, and will be very relevant for this section.

#### Specific objectives of the topic:

- Knowledge of the main theories of approach to the television text and methodologies of reception analysis.
- Knowledge of the institutional factors that determine the reception of television texts.
- Ability to recognize the historical and cultural references in the reception of television texts.
- Ability to integrate critical thinking and creative practice in development of media story-telling.

**Detailed content:**

- The Cultural Studies: the Birmingham School.
- TV ratings: quantitative and qualitative methods.
- The ethnography of audiences.
- Fan cultures.

**Introductory notes:**

According to Jeremy Butler in the book *Television: Critical Methods and Applications* (1994), mass communication research is one of the main trends in television studies:

“The empirical study of television based on principles which derived from scientific research methods. Therefore, the research must meet criteria such as applied experimentation and informed observation, the objectivity of the researcher, the use of experiments that are replicable, quantification of the results and the use of theoretical foundations to generate hypotheses to be tested through empirical research. In the empirical study, two main areas can be defined:

- The industry perspective. Most empirical studies are commissioned by the television industry to respond two principal questions:  
What did viewers watch and what type of viewers watched which shows?  
- Investigation of the ratings.  
What will viewers watch in the future, and what type of viewers will be watching? - Market research, like focus groups.
- The academic perspective. Some empirical studies developed in academia are linked to the industry, including:  
Strong effects theories.  
Limited effects theories.  
The uses and gratifications theories.  
Content analysis.

The influential television scholar David Morley, a noted member of the Birmingham School, offered this summary of audience research in his entry for "The Encyclopedia of Television":

"The history of studies of the media audience can be seen as a series of oscillations between perspectives which have stressed the power of the text (or message) over its audiences and perspectives which have stresses the barriers "protecting" the audience from the potential effects of the message. The first position is most obviously represented by the whole tradition of effects studies, mobilising a "hypodermic" model of media influence, in which the media are seen to have the power to "inject" their audiences with particular "messages", which will cause them to behave in particular ways. This has involved, from the Right, perspectives which see the media as causing the breakdown of "traditional values" and, from the Left, perspectives which see the media causing their audience to remain quiescent in political terms, inculcating consumerist values, or causing them to inhabit some form of false consciousness.

One of the most influential versions of this kind of "hypodermic" theory of media effects was that advanced by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, along with other members of the Frankfurt School of Social Research. Their "pessimistic mass society thesis" reflected the authors' experience of the breakdown of modern Germany into fascism during the 1930s, a breakdown which was attributed, in part, to the loosening of traditional ties and structures--which were seen as then leaving people more "atomised" and exposed to external influences, and especially to the pressure of the mass propaganda of powerful leaders, the most effective agency of which was the mass media. This "pessimistic mass society thesis" stressed the conservative and reconciliatory role of "mass culture" for the audience. Mass culture was seen to suppress "potentialities", and to deny awareness of contradictions in a "one-dimensional world"; only art, in fictional and dramatic form, could preserve the qualities of negation and transcendence. Implicit here, was a "hypodermic" model of the media which were seen as having the power to "inject" a repressive ideology directly into the consciousness of the masses".

In the book *Television Studies: The Key Concepts* (2007) the audience is defined through three distinctive points of view:

“1. A focus on the semiotic moment of meaning-making, exploring how audiences read or make sense of specific texts, such as news programmes or situation comedies. This includes an appreciation of the way people absorb information, and the role of narrative, visual information and other textual features in constructing meanings.

2. An ethnographic focus on how people behave when they are being an audience, on the ways in which media technology is used and perceived and what David Morley has called ‘the politics of the living room’ (Morley 1992). Much of this work has explored issues of gender, use and power.

3. A focus on audiences who define themselves partly in relation to specific genres or media texts, whether as readers of romance fiction or as fans of shows like *Star Trek*.”

In the study *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (British Film Institute, 1980) David Morley adapted from Frank Parkin a schema to define the type of reading by the audience:

“a) where the audience interprets the message in terms of the same code employed by the transmitter—e.g. where both ‘inhabit’ the dominant ideology.

b) where the audience employs a ‘negotiated’ version of the code employed by the transmitter—e.g. receiver employs a negotiated version of the dominant ideology used by the transmitter to encode the message.

c) where the audience employs an ‘oppositional’ code to interpret the message and therefore interprets its meaning through a different code from that employed by the transmitter.”

In the 80s, the growing field of Television Studies was complemented by the so-called New Audience Research, which was based on interpretive ethnography

and with a more political focus. Ien Ang's study *Watching Dallas* is a classic example. The author placed an advertisement in a woman's magazine asking for the readers to write about why they liked to watch the program, getting 42 letters in various length that were used to understand the global popularity of the program.

More recently, a growing trend in audience research has been focused on fandom studies and the development of what Henry Jenkins has called "participatory culture" (White Paper "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century"):

"Forms of participatory culture include:

- Affiliations — memberships, formal and informal, in online communities centered around various forms of media, such as Friendster, Facebook, message boards, metagaming, game clans, or MySpace).
- Expressions — producing new creative forms, such as digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videomaking, fan fiction writing, zines, mash-ups).
- Collaborative Problem-solving — working together in teams, formal and informal, to complete tasks and develop new knowledge (such as through Wikipedia, alternative reality gaming, spoiling).
- Circulations — Shaping the flow of media (such as podcasting, blogging).