

A Passive Audience? Structuralist and Effects Studies

How do we respond to cellphone, film, Internet, television screens? Are there fundamental differences in our reactions to format and technology – or a core similarity? How do we cross cultures in understanding content? What is the relationship between the psychology of individual “readings” and the sociology of responses by groups, genders, generations? How can “scientific” audience research advance beyond accumulating data – what is “progress” in media user studies?

Addressing these questions throughout this volume, I begin with a short new media narrative of everyday cellphone use in a complex Southeast Asian city. Its content will be easily recognized by many among today’s traveling academics and students (the few Australians in the large undergraduate and postgraduate classes I teach in Sydney are far outnumbered by those who have joined us from nations overseas). To others this story will seem more distantly located, though its moments of involved absorption and anticipation of screen text we shall argue are global. For the purpose of this brief book is to gain insight into the underlying universal structure of media use.

This short narrative was recounted to me and another researcher talking to people visiting a transnational telecommunications company customer support center at a vast shopping mall in central Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s capital city. (The hybrid name of the center’s location – Berjaya Times Square – signals the status which some have given Kuala Lumpur as the world’s most global or postmodernist metropolis by virtue of its multi-cultural Asian-Western architecture, food, religious expression, and population). Many of these customers had come to the center to ask about their cellphone use or (as in the case of our story’s source) to register their post-paid account in response to new legislation (see an extended description in chapter 6).

In this narrative a Chinese Malaysian middle-aged woman (or “aunt” in Malaysian English) tells us about the everyday but engaging pleasure

she derives from the cellphone's ability to immerse her interest, with its incoming messages particularly distracting her from the tumultuous city through which she travels by bus. Let us call her (fictitiously) Ai Wei. Her times of passive absorption, of focusing on the phone, it is important to be aware, are simultaneously moments of active anticipation. Electronically engaged, she enthusiastically expects its narrative.

Never merely concentrated on the immediate present (caller numbers), Ai Wei's immersion in screen data is always also an informed future-focused concern with the associated call content she would receive by clicking on her cellphone pad. As the philosopher Heidegger might well have said had wireless communication existed in the last century, her absorption is continually *fore-structured* by anticipation or *fore-sight*: she has an always present *fore-concept* (1962) of messages from "familiar numbers" as "safe to access." Displaying an interpretative understanding of her digital-human environment, Ai Wei tells us in everyday words which need to be addressed by theory, "when I look at the number and I'm not familiar, normally I wouldn't pick it up" because unknown callers are likely to be "weird [people]" who "give you those noises."

In her cellphone use, this Malaysian Chinese aunt blurs the public-private distinction which has governed much media research conducted either outside or within the home (see Gauntlett and Hill, 1999: 4). For within the "architectonic structure" (García-Montes et al., 2006: 72) of the surrounding city Ai Wei links with domesticity, her (spatiotemporally) extended family. Receiving those calls or texts she chooses to hear or read, Ai Wei pursues (like their sender) a coherent meaning for their content. Absorbing rather than alienating her, a message can enlighten her life: "when I receive an SMS from my niece" who is able to use "all the short forms and even insert a picture," "it makes my day." Considering her subjective narrative in more abstract terms, we shall see in subsequent chapters that its underlying structure of *perception*, *prediction*, *positing*, and *pleasurable acquisition* of appropriate meaning characterizes audience activity widely. We need to confirm such theory (or at least fail to falsify it) by referring to everyday accounts of media use beyond questionnaires. Screen content can prompt painful responses.

Our Times Square interviewee ignores caller numbers she does not recognize: she resists responding, anticipating that she would hear "weird" sounds rather than comfortably familiar communication. Ai Wei reduces ("deconstructs") the former as dehumanized "noises" rather than meaningful messages and distances herself from such contact. However, as

someone who herself writes SMS, she identifies with her niece's processing of communicative intent, evaluating her literacy favorably: "it makes my day." A less caring aunt could have displayed apathy.

Ai Wei has a complex response to her cellphone call and messaging content, appropriating some items, alienated by others. Appreciative but equally analytical, she resembles a fan of phoning, "moving fluidly" between "proximity and distance" from the material (Jenkins, 1992: 65).

Audiences actively interpret screen content. From a *sociological* point of view, using media across the world draws upon people's different cultural perspectives on events seen and heard. Muslim Malays characteristically do not regard television's religious images of Islamic practice in the same way as Caucasian Christians. We shall see Chinese New Year interpreted differently.

But the *psychological* process of our coming to understand stories has the same structure everywhere. Drawing on our background knowledge of media forms, patterns, or types, we identify narratives we hear or see unfolding: we anticipate and construct an account of their meaning. Program content confirms or upsets our preceding concepts (or stereotypes). This model of understanding we shall see is fundamental to integrating the study of media users.

In the pages which follow we trace the evolution of insights into media reception through the last thirty years of audience investigation – from European structuralism and North American effects studies to considering viewers as active, and from reader reception research to new media user theory. This is an important path to follow through communication studies linking "questions of signification" on screens to "questions of subjectivity" (MacCabe, 1985: 6) amidst audiences.

At different stages on this route we can look sideways and evaluate environmentally, weighing up from an "audience perspective" other aspects of media studies such as narrative theory or the political economy of content production. Moreover, at the conclusion of this discursive excursion, I shall show that knowing how we "read" media enables us to gain insight into a wide range of screen-using activity, from successfully advertising Coca-Cola on television in an Islamic majority nation to Asian tourists enjoyably engaged in reading Western websites.

So how do we draw on culture to construct an identity for screen content and self concept? I maintain throughout this book that we react to films, programs, or web pages in ways which are globally (psychologically) alike and locally (sociologically) particular. The cultural identity I am proposing for ourselves as media users is both fixed and fluid. The cognitive process at

play in our “production of knowledge” (MacCabe, 1976: 10) from uncertain content on screen is structured mentally. We do not understand a program instantly, but rather aim at insight, gradually establishing it as a coherent story. But while this goal of comprehension is everywhere the same, the content with which we complete a media narrative draws its particular detail from the social context in which we achieve these acts of understanding.

Watching television, for instance, we universally anticipate events on screen or *project* (Gadamer, 1975: 224) narrative meaning (“they’ll marry!,” “they’ll split up!”): subsequently, we check our speculation as the story develops. But we perceive or construct that meaning from particular cultural perspectives (for instance, secular and spiritual “readings” of a TV marriage are distinct). Living lives of disparate dimensions within a multitude of social circumstances, we draw upon different stocks of knowledge or conceptual *horizons of understanding* (ibid.: 217) in classifying (fore-structuring), considering as coherent and consequently comprehending content.

Our knowledge of media narratives is not immediate. San Francisco, Sarawak, and Sydney audience responses to television are psychological processes following a similar cognitive path of expecting and establishing content. Assisted by literary theory and philosophy, I shall later map this global activity conceptually. But drawing on our culturally local interpretations of what we see, we develop varying (and sometimes strongly evaluative) accounts of a program’s events (“he’s a real Casanova!”/“he’s a real challenge to our Asian Values!”). In the chapters which follow, this global/local model of media(ted) perception will be constructed, engaged with, and extended as a story of media use. It will be shown to support studies of cellphone experience and marketing as well as analyses of critical citizens and consensual consumers in their varying responses to online journalism and e-tourism. But we turn now to consider earlier theory, some “mass communications dinosaurs” (Ruddock, 2007: 3) in Europe and the United States: “techno-determinist” (Ferguson, 1992: 72) structuralism and early effects studies.

European Structuralism (1970s): Silent Subjects – Passive Audiences?

In structuralist media theory of the 1970s the conjunction of cinematic screen and spectator reaction was represented as wholly determining

cause of an effect. Audience responses are constructed by the text. Passive audiences necessarily followed film politics. Spectators succumbed to ideology (or ideas serving the interests of the powerful): male chauvinist cinema effected sexist response. Structuralist study of the relationship between viewed and viewer reduced the latter to a social atom acceding always to screen prescription: the “spectator must be placed in a position from which the image is regarded as primary” (MacCabe, 1976: 11).

Structuralist study of the visual and its effect on the viewer can be found in contemporary issues of the journal *Screen*, although as MacCabe noted the latter represented the voices of a “more general movement” (1985: 6) concerned with understanding signs and their communication of meaning. As we shall see, structuralist theory could never find a conceptual place for active media users: for these audiences did not merely absorb but rather independently evaluated screen narrative’s political positioning of its viewers.

The structuralist narrative of the viewing subject or cinematic spectator excludes from its model of the media recipient the latter’s past as a person in society. In this account, the “real reader is prefigured by, and coincides with, the ideal recipient the text posits for itself” (Robins, 1979: 363). That is, as mainstream film audiences, irrespective of our cultural background, we simply circulate the categories of worldly understanding to which we are “subjected” by the wide screen.

Structuralists evacuated from responses to media the spectator’s conscious cognitive processing of content over time. Our expectation and establishing of narrative is eliminated. Instead, reception of screen images is regarded as immediate. According to this delusory philosophy, when engaged by/with audio-visual texts, we are no longer people endowed with a capacity for creative thought and criticism emerging from experience but become instead conduits of cinematic ideology – capitalist, patriarchal, or otherwise. Audiences purchase a pass/ticket whose true cost is constraint: apparently escaping the mundane, they merely reproduce the forms of sociopolitical understanding presented on screen. In the seductive space and leisure time of the cinema, the latter alone is efficacious in a “productivity of meanings” (McDonnell and Robins, 1980: 194) supporting the status quo.

The film’s “structure,” its particular inflection of ideology or political persuasion through storytelling, determines audience deliberation on its events. According to structuralists, we are passive recipients of cinematic imagery, the “loaded” representations of femininity and masculinity, ethnicity and social class with which its narratives allocate and deny power: the screen “puts in place an experience for a subject whom it includes”

(Heath, 1973: 11). While cinema narrates events, the unseen spectating “subject” in the dark of the auditorium is acknowledged and absorbed in the story’s “articulation in which it is, in fact, defined” (MacCabe, 1974: 17). As attentive audience, playing its part, we wait and witness, acceding to film’s sometimes spectacular address to those watching.

Structuralists argued, then, that cinema positioned spectators ideologically, passively and politically: audience cognition followed authored content. Acknowledging our place as (no more than) appropriate addressees of the screen text on display, we learn all we (should) wish to know. Acquiescing in this promised “supra-positional omniscience” (MacCabe, 1976: 18), we absorb an ideologically accredited insight, a ticketed totality of world view. The audience willingly adopts the cinema-defined philosophical and physical position of screen spectator. But, sinking into their seats, reduced to their role as cinema-defined viewers, people’s wider experience is eliminated as a source of knowledge and understanding.

We become comfortable film enthusiasts: but the precondition of an easy and untroubled structuralist spectatorship is not only the purchase of a cinema ticket but our uncritical recruitment to the reactionary politics circulating on screen. As well behaved spectators we respond appropriately to movie narratives. But in our silent gaze and recognition of large screen authority we are appropriated by dominant cinema as spokespersons for the problematic, for concepts of the social world which are challengeable outside the doors of the movie theatre.

Considered within the structuralist account of being a spectator, when we listen to the detective Petersen in *Mildred Pierce*, we are nothing more or less than addressees of that patriarchal policeman on screen. With skeptical experience absent from our memory, our thought is taken into (his) custody. Now categorically unable to consider alternatives, we presume without question the authority of the police department: its status on screen is articulated in the film’s visual privileging (e.g., through upward tilting camera shots) of Petersen as embodying justice and truth. Confronted by this dominant/dominating discourse of a powerful physique, the spectator is “fixed in his [*sic*] position securely by the reality of the image” (Brewster and MacCabe, 1974: 9). Construing the world in these cinematic terms of masculinity, our now absolute assumption of male authority underwrites our judgments about Mildred in particular and women more widely.

Science fiction movies primarily define this world rather than an alternative universe. When a story returns (us) safely to the “normality” of events in small town America after the vanquished Martian invasion, as structuralism’s

spectatorial “subjects” we unproblematically share that cinematic definition (delusion?) of security. From the analytical perspective of such *Screen* theory in the seventies, we are as an audience separated from individual (idiosyncratic?) memories which could suggest a different perception of rural tranquility.

In the cinema, we are said by structuralism to be “interpellated” as spectating subjects: a powerful “text ensures the position of the subject in a relation of dominant specularity” (MacCabe, 1974: 12) to film narrative. The camera both constructs and curtails our apparent omniscience as spectators knowledgeable of events on screen from motive to outcome. For with our own experience elided or forgotten in our position as textually “subjected” audience, we are entrapped. We see society simply from the film’s ideological perspective, insulated from critical (e.g., socialist) alternatives.

Audiences are thereby fixed in a position of “pure specularity” (ibid.) while engaging with the “classic realist texts” of the mainstream movie house. These films “work hard to disguise the evidence of artifice” (Ruddock, 2007: 122) or technical construction. In our attending exclusively to the screen, its representing of extra-cinematic reality seems obviously valid. Where our messy mundane lives are absent, there can be no evidence for doubting a story’s implicit politics.

Writ large on overpowering screens, an already socially dominant “symbolic system” is “imposed on the human animal in its construction into a subject” (Brewster, 1975: 6, emphasis in the original). At the door of the cinema we hand in any alternative conceptual currency we may possess – to be collected (if not forgotten) on the way out. In 1970s *Screen* analyses, cinema was separated from the society in which it was consumed. The viewer has no voice, becoming instead a silent subject. Theory of spectatorship was rendered autonomous from the actual audience: there is a neglect of historical specificity (McDonnell and Robins, 1980: 176–7, 202).

In this symbolic “petrification of the spectator” (MacCabe, 1974: 24) we are constrained to think the politics wherein cinema positions us: our speculative thoughts cannot move outside the categories or “mental machinery” of a mainstream consensus. Film incorporates “subject positions binding individuals into the production of certain forms of totality” (Brewster et al., 1976: 115). We look but lose sight of the progressive. Only radical Marxist film (known also as non-realist cinema) through presenting the audience with contradictory accounts of the social world is said to be able to prompt us to consider the tensions within capitalist ideology. When an

“identification is broken, becomes difficult to hold,” “we grasp in one and the same moment both the relations that determine that identity and our relation to its representation” (MacCabe, 1976: 25).

In 1976 MacCabe reconstructed his earlier structuralism [*Screen* 15(2) 1974] in which he “made the subject the effect of the structure (the subject is simply the sum of positions allocated to it)” (1976: 25). For all political intents and purposes, cinematic narration and consumption were identical. Instead, drawing on a linguistic model of the relationship between spectator and screen, he now no longer assimilates them. “Text and reader” are “separate” (1976: 25). In this turn to poststructuralist theory, MacCabe frees the audience from its subjection to a causally determining textual structure: reception does not replicate cinematic recitation of ideology. He looks to conceptually “focus on the position of the (active) speaking subject within the utterance” (1976: 12). As he later wrote in reference to his views, by “calling me a structuralist my opponents revealed their ignorance” (1985: 30).

With discourse we become interested in the dialectical relation between speaker and language in which language always already offers a position to the speaker and yet, at the same time, the act of speaking may itself displace those positions. (MacCabe, 1976: 12)

Cinema’s call to spectators to position themselves in “binding” (MacCabe, 1985: 10) identification with its representations can be resisted. Writing about an actively creative and critical audience capable of both alignment and antagonism towards politically “contradictory positions” (MacCabe, 1976: 12) in mainstream film texts now becomes possible within MacCabe’s radically redesigned model of the media user. He concludes that is a “question of analyzing a film within a determinate social moment so that it is possible to determine what identifications will be made and by whom.” Society comes to the cinema: “we have to consider the relation between reader and text in its historical specificity” (MacCabe, 1976: 25, 24).

The spectator’s historical specificity – her or his culturally informed and informing experience – indeed needed to enter the abstract world of *Screen* structuralism. Avowedly Marxist, its high formalist theory circulated untouched by everyday reality. As Morley later remarked, the “problem with much of *Screen*’s work” is its theorists’ “unjustifiable conflation” of the political position to which they perceive a film addressing its message with that of the actual “social subject” (1980: 159). Cinema’s intended and real

audiences are conflated. But many of us can think – for example – beyond the assumptions of patriarchal power to which much film subscribes as self-evident. Albeit mundane, everyday thought is not always contained within the profit-focused categories of the capitalist screen.

Film theorists may tease out of a mainstream text on screen a particular perception of “normal” behavior which many of its eventual spectators can share. Narrative cinema frequently presumes a successful heterosexual romance brings its assumed audience pleasure. But richly diverse three-dimensional human spectators will always “exceed” 1970s *Screen* contributors’ reductive one-dimensional statement of their “political petrification” by film. Real media users must always be more than their abstract definition by structuralists as subscribers to suspicious ideology. Without a specific knowledge of signs signifying status they will not be able to recognize the ways in which the screen’s address can “hail” them to serve the already powerful. If in our social capacity as spectators seated before the screen we are reduced to being merely one-dimensional ideological implants, how can we recognize from remembered experience the presence of police in a movie as an iconic imperative signaling the authoritative source of patriarchal pronouncements within whose terms we are required to think?

Recruitment to reactionary ideas requires that the conscript can understand the cultural signifiers of meaning – the local language – in which the message is encoded. The audience’s acceding to film’s furthering of a view of the masculine as overwhelmingly potent presumes their ability to recollect particular discursive ways in which cinema signals power (e.g., images of fast cars and fantastic residences). If she loses contact in the darkness of the movie house with earlier experience, the amnesiac addressee of film can no longer function to fulfill a “subject position.”

Powerfully performing global ideology (ill-supported belief implicated in illicit power) requires supplementing by local knowledge. Spectators are conceptualized by structuralist analysis as no more than political positions, as without access to mundane memory when facing film. But deprived of their capacity to recall culturally specific experience, audiences lack a knowledge of signs enabling them to acquiesce in dominant cinema’s audio-visual assertion of capitalist consumerism as “natural” or “normal,” as constituting an everyday reality without alternative plausible possibility.

Cinema’s ideological positioning of its audience requires particular memories from spectators, their recollecting culturally specific modes of conveying power. In *Mildred Pierce*, Petersen needs to be perceived as a detective if his performance is to accrue power for patriarchal structures of

justice. If recognition rests upon remembering, we are necessarily always more than simply defined political addressees of those who seek and secure status on screen. As media users, we exceed their categories of service. Allowing audiences access to earlier experience must be written into accounting for their alignment by screen politics. Poststructuralism's argument (advanced below) is that memory, as well as allowing an audience's passive acquiescing in cinematic authority, can be a source of active protest.

Structuralism as excluding audience experience

Structuralism argued for a limited account of viewing pleasure: this derived from cinema's (alleged) capacity to resolve spectators' psychic conflicts. Watching film on a large screen, the audience uncritically adopted the cinematic text's apparently coherent view of the world and forgot its own contradictory and fragmented experience. "What is politically important about this textual organization is that it removes the spectator from the realm of contradiction" (MacCabe, 1976: 21). Here, enjoyment rested on amnesia.

Identifying with James Bond, male spectators displaced a "real life" disjunction between aspiration and actuality, between cultural "ought" and constrained capacity. As cinematic audiences, forgetting "constitutive contradictions" (ibid.: 27) they celebrated instant integration of masculine fantasy and fulfillment. Film accomplished a "fixation of the reader in (ideological) position as a unified and coherent subject, the apparent source (as narrative agent) of the text's meaning" (Robins, 1979: 367).

Fundamentally radical in rethinking response studies, the media user research which followed structuralism posited a distance between the cultural perspectives of audiences and those available on screen. From viewers' differing immersion in ethnic, gender, generational, and social class experience there emerges a wide range of interpretative insights – with media users "reading" narrative events in a variety of ways. For critical cultural theorists succeeding structuralism, where text conflicts with experience, the latter is not forgotten but used by an audience to forge an "interrogation" of content to the point of rejection.

Two concepts of "structure"

Structuralism, then, regarded media users as absorbing rather than actively responding to screen narrative's political proposition(ing). But as intellectual

inquiry it had an additional deficiency. It focused on the structure of the product (the text), ignoring the equally structured process wherein audiences achieve understanding of narrative content in viewing. Structuralists concerned themselves with the storytelling forms of films or television programs. They argued that these narratives sought to resolve underlying social oppositions (e.g., conflicts between the benign and the bad, good and evil) or were covert conservative arguments for the status quo.

However, media use is also a cognitively structured process. The meaning of a program is developed by viewers as a particular “product of certain shared systems of signification” (Eagleton, 1983: 107). Audiences recognize a story as exemplifying a type or genre: they are thereby enabled to anticipate likely developments and seek confirmation of expectations. Watching television, accessing the web, we draw upon “frames of cultural assumption” (ibid.: 122) like a knowledge of narrative patterns and how they characteristically occur.

By which groups of media users is such cultural awareness held in common? How is it drawn upon by viewers to secure intelligibility for a particular screen content? What subjective – yet structured – processes occur when media users bring knowledge (e.g., of film genre) to bear upon a single text, seeing it from a wider aesthetic perspective or horizon of understanding?

When structuralist theory refers to “laws of the mind” (Eagleton, 1983: 109) its concern is not to posit patterns within an audience’s pursuit of program meaning: for this process is regarded as “random, untheorizable” (ibid.: 114). Rather, these “laws” are to be found governing the product or conclusion of that mental event, as a less than explicit aspect of the established story. For instance, analyzing a narrative can yield the discovery that it has necessarily incorporated an (allegedly) universally occurring antagonism or opposition between agents of order (good) and disorder (evil).

Subsequent reader reception theory, on the other hand, seeks to “lay bare the very structures of consciousness”: it asks about the shape of the media user’s regular mental activity which makes understanding of texts possible “in the first place” (Eagleton, 1983: 56). Such philosophically sensitive psychology is concerned in studying audiences with discerning the intersubjective (or universal) structure of the informed thought *processes* through which media users make meaning. This patterned cognitive activity precedes (but is responsible for) the final *product* – an intelligible text on screen. Structuralism, on the other hand, ignores our understanding narrative, the “actual speaking, writing, listening and reading of concrete social individuals” (ibid.: 114).

US Media Effects Studies (1970): Audiences as Observable and Measurable

US “mass communication research has been dominated by an effects-orientation.” “This concern with media effects is guided by a one-way model of mass communication ... it fit [*sic*] well with the existing concerns of mass communication scholars.” Studies of “media effects are empirical, quantitative social science investigations”: one “cannot accuse these scholars of assuming that media effects are usually positive for the audience individuals under study” (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995: viii–ix).

The effects paradigm (or widely adopted theory) assumes media and their audiences are connected in a basic cause-and-effect scenario (Bryant and Thompson, 2002: 19). For instance, Bandura argues (with considerable intellectual intensity if not complete intelligibility) while presenting his social cognitive theory of mass communication that he is providing an account of media “determinants” operating in a “causal structure of factors” (2002: 139) in respect of their viewers. Both Bryant and Thompson (2002) and Lowery and DeFleur (1995) discuss in detail the developmental path followed by the effects model of media causing audience behavior: they provide major and widely available statements of the approach. I selectively cite their case studies in our critical focus on the theory.

In media effects research, strategies of investigation have been based on a model of inquiry adopted from physical science (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995: 2). However, the model against which this media research measures itself methodologically is only one possible account of scientific investigative activity. This *positivist* view of how inquiry is conducted defines the route to a successful research outcome as follows: when (1) events are *seen* and (2) highly correlated (ideally, constantly conjoined) *statistically* this is (3) *sufficient* to assert their *causal connection*. Within this influential (but erroneous) account of scientific procedure which has for decades governed the effects program of exploring audiences, the focus of investigation must be observable. For instance, Lowery and DeFleur describe an experiment on cinema spectators in which electrodes and mechanical devices measured visible physiological changes (e.g., in breathing rates and sweating) as “indices of emotional arousal” (1995: 26). Preoccupied by studying events which can be seen (and heard), effects investigations are often of negative media content and (allegedly) consequent adverse audience behavior. Bandura’s well-known

research into this topic concluded that children who watched “physically aggressive actions” on screen later imitated the violence (see Bryant and Thompson, 2002: 74).

Bryant and Thompson (2002) consider four different methods of studying children’s “fright reactions” to film and other media: (1) administering a questionnaire allowing one of four responses from “not at all scared” to “very, very scared”; (2) evaluating the child’s facial expression from a videotape made while the child is watching the program; (3) attaching small sensors to the child’s fingers allowing physiological data to be collected; (4) using “behavioral measures of fear” (181). Each focuses on observable, preferably quantifiable, signifiers of subjective fear.

Discussing the focus of effects research on the visible, Bryant and Thompson assert that numerous studies have found a causal link between the viewing of media violence and an increase in aggressive behavior. But this is established as a statistical rather than subjective relationship. They concede that in effects research no findings or theoretical formulations have explained why only a “few go out and imitate the actions they see on the screen” (2002: 3).

Fortunately, an alternative philosophical understanding of scientific activity known as *realism* (Harré, 1972) exists. (It is important to note that *this* realism has nothing to do with filmic “realism” or the careful editing of mainstream cinema images so that they transparently meet the spectator’s desire to establish a coherent world on screen.)

Scientific realism has for many years emphasized the importance of attending to underlying processes or “mechanisms” by reference to which events in the observable world can be rendered intelligible (e.g., the kinetic theory’s account of gas particles whose motion can account for pressure upon the walls of a container). The hidden mechanism through which visible causes give rise to effects which are seen and heard must never remain a “magic bullet” but instead be disclosed – or at least be examined indirectly (e.g., through a microscope). In the human sciences, focus groups and prolonged interviews can disclose subjective narrative data.

A realist study of human phenomena includes the unobservable as an appropriate topic for analysis (e.g., extended interpretations of television content which are presented both as rationally justified by audiences on the basis of stories seen on screen and as the reason for their subsequent action). But within positivism such a wide epistemological embrace – or focus of inquiry – is excluded as subjective and unscientific. (See chapter 5 for more on psychological realism in media user research.)

The positivist perception of acceptable research methodology identifies being “objective” with quantitative analysis (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995: 14). The questionnaire as a means of generating responses or data to be enumerated is assumed to be an unproblematic tool for investigating audiences. The idea that *what* is being counted (its meaning!) can be experienced and described in different ways – often profoundly contested – receives little enthusiasm from those who pursue a positivist approach to media analysis. Yet TV program or Internet page and responses by audiences are precisely of this indeterminate character. Together they can constitute a seemingly chaotic multiplicity of meanings at odds with the singularly focused “jargon” (or disciplinary discourse) of a positivist investigator. How does our mundane yet multicultural understanding of media use relate, for instance, to Bandura’s theory-laden conception of an “agentic conceptual framework” involving “triadic reciprocal causation” (2002: 121) between program and person? It is important that otherwise enigmatic theory be related through definition to everyday thought.

Positivism rests on an account of human perception. For this erroneous reduction of scientific activity to focusing on the observable and quantifiable also claims that we see the world around us *immediately*. Irrespective of our diverging cultural histories, the same sensory impressions arrive instantly as conscious experience: we talk about perceiving compilations of these “sense-data” as seeing material objects. Language denotes or names these phenomena directly, excluding any reference to culture.

Phenomenology, on the other hand, has pursued the view that perception is *interpretative* activity, taking place over time. We do not passively receive a flood of sense-data, but rather actively fit present experience to pre-existing mental structure. At the core of seeing is synthesizing recognition, the preconscious matching of sensory data to cognitive template which results in successful perception. Looking at objects and people around us, we – slowly or swiftly – see them as instances of already known phenomena and respond to them accordingly. A friend approaching from a distance is recognized – gradually. The world is *mediated* through our cultural memories.

In short, for positivism there is no process in perception. Despite our manifestly different backgrounds and beliefs the world is held to be immediately impressed on all as identical. The view of media use presented in this volume rejects not only positivism but its adoption of this untenable *empiricism*. For seeing is an activity in which we come to recognize our environment, with people from culturally varying vantage points or horizons of

understanding identifying where they are (their physical foregrounds) in divergent ways.

We shall pursue a scientifically realist approach in studying our perception of screen and sound, asserting it to be always engaged in the subjective activity of interpretation or *mediated* through thought. Looking is laden with assumptions. The bright disk in the sky has in the distant past been regarded as the sun revolving around the earth. In seeing, we assign meaning to events whether in our close environment or distantly located in a television program.

Often this process of interpreting is informed by cultural beliefs which vary substantially from one group of viewers to another across the world. Watching an imported US video, a Malaysian audience's "Asian values" can lead to a very different account of program events (e.g., as ethically problematic) from an American response. Because we are knowledgeable media users, our remembering past television supports our continually seeing new content as being of a certain type (from action drama to soap opera). Guided by memory our expectation and establishing of developments on screen is distinct from viewers located in other communities of cultural awareness (for instance, those who have never watched so-called "reality television").

Qualitative realist audience research focuses on *how* people come to see their media environment. Accurate description is as important here as correctly counting is to quantitative methods. Following a qualitative method is acknowledged to be possible but placed on the margins (and misunderstood) within media positivism as "exploratory" or "suggestive" (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995: 33). Analytical attention to listeners' or viewers' narratives of media consumption is reductively regarded as merely revealing radio or television's "subtle influences" (*ibid.*: xi) on people who otherwise perceive (passively record) the same stretch of narrative.

The empiricist story about our gaining knowledge is that seeing our surroundings involves receiving a flood of sense-data, of universally identical perceptions. Media users of varying cultural hues do not fundamentally interpret screen events distinctively, seeing different aspects from a range of perspectives or horizons of understanding. Rather, it is the same story on screen for all.

Empiricist discussion of watching television dismisses as merely subtle influence on the same (passive) response the centrally significant event of a program's culturally varying (active) interpretation. Yet this cognitive process generates a media user's observable quantifiable behavior. Positivism's investigative agenda does not include audience expectation and establishing

of program narratives. Instead, it is determined to steer the researcher's attention away from the allegedly subjectively idiosyncratic and unscientific. Media investigation must construct a "dynamic discipline" of "generalizations, causal explanations, and theoretical predictions" (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995: xi–xiii) focused on human behavior – seen as identical by all.

Audience research was conducted on the movie *Birth of a Nation*, which "portrays blacks in negative terms and is considered an antiblack statement." This study of spectators seemed to show the film had a "substantial impact on the attitudes of its audience" (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995: 30). Exemplifying positivistic inquiry, the research focused upon two observable phenomena alleged to be related as cause and effect – negative movie images and anti-black answers in a multiple choice questionnaire. (Emphasizing the positivistic preference for enumerating visual evidence, measuring such participant responses can now be achieved by "automated instruments": Bryant and Thompson, 2002: 14.)

No reference is made in this investigation to the intervening process between cause and (alleged) effect, to the subjective experience of people interpreting *Birth of a Nation* as a negative ethnic statement. Qualitative research (using contributions from audience focus groups) could have recorded this activity. There is no room in this "striking" investigation for *seeing as* in plural ways – for a cultural diversity of media user backgrounds prompting variety in reading response (e.g., from both African and Caucasian American perspectives). Few of the subjects in the experiment had known or even seen an African American prior to watching the film (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995: 30).

Reflecting on a "one-time study" which has major methodological significance for us, Lowery and DeFleur cite work on the radio broadcasting of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* story of a Martian invasion as a causal "trigger for panic behavior" (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995: 94, 55). Despite this positivist prelude to their account, in order to relate the media stimulus to its observable effect, the original research continues in realist mode: we are provided with a qualitative survey extensively exploring in narrative depth subjective listener interpretations of the broadcast.

These plural perspectives supported varying audience projections or anticipation of developments both on the radio program and in the world after the announcement of alien arrivals. Listeners classifying the broadcast as drama without material consequences remained calm. But media users designating radio as generally offering reliable access to reality (ibid.: 56) predicted disaster and panicked in the face of this Martian approach.

The meaning they perceived entailed imminent mayhem. In this research, permitting listeners' subjective interpretation and associated anticipation to be included (realism) renders observable data intelligible.

Media effects: uses and gratifications theory

Can effects studies be rescued from positivism? Lowery and DeFleur dismiss reducing the model of media response which informs these investigations to the "magic bullet idea" that people react to media messages "immediately and uniformly" as "merely passive receivers" (1995: 94–5). Adapting to a critical scholarly environment, effects studies developed a further informing guide to research in the form of uses and gratifications theory where media audiences are construed as more – or less – active. Under this broad banner of media inquiry, for instance, a qualitative study of US daytime serial listeners showed how subjective processes of audience identification with fictional characters are central to media users enjoying soap opera drama they had switched on to switch off from daily life. The gratification gained from viewing included "emotional release," "wishful thinking," and recognizing "valuable advice" (ibid.: 107–8).

But outside such enlightened investigation of mental activity the focus of research stimulated by effects studies engaging with uses and gratifications theory was still on what media are "doing to the people who regularly consumed its products" (ibid.: 96). Positivism's passive quantifiable percipients of media content continued to feature in research, for example, where people studied the "long term and additive" "effects of serials on their audiences" (ibid.: 97). In such effects studies' selective sight audience activity remained limited to visible viewing, to energetically engaging in observable channel choosing on domestic TV. The mental processes associated with media use occasionally featured on research menus (e.g., Perry's expectancy-value theory (2002: 77) refers to people anticipating the attributes of programs). But otherwise an audience's interpretative activity (whose successful achievement is presupposed by "gratification effects") is substantially beyond focus. Indeed recognizing its existence would be incompatible with continuing to talk of media *effects* – on a passive recipient of programs.

Media effects: two-step flow theory

In a subsequent makeover of media effects theory, Lowery and DeFleur argue for replacing the "hypothesis of powerful and immediate effects" with

a “two-step flow idea”: the “movement of information through interpersonal networks, from the media to people (opinion leaders) and from there to other people” (1995: 192). A further link is inserted here into the explanatory causal chain between screen and subsequent behavior. This extended model of media effects flowing from program to person subverts the earlier “stimulus-response framework” in which content had consequences with “little in between” them (ibid.: 209).

Belief in the immediacy of media effect yielded to the hierarchical conception of screen content descending from the heights of first-hand awareness (or creation) of information through opinion leaders to its lowly consumption. In this theory of postponed productivity, knowledge needs “two steps” in reaching audiences to have behavioral consequences (e.g., in voting). But the positivist guide to good methodology continued to inform the investigative agenda.

For instance, a research program on the creation of informed groups concluded that as opinion leaders, “better educated and more affluent” women are the “most influential,” with the latter defined as having “many social contacts in the community” (ibid.: 208). As we have seen, arriving at such a conjunction of observable variables (“affluence,” “education,” and “influence”/“social contacts”) is considered by positivists as being well on the way to recording their relationship as cause and effect. No attention is paid to the realist requirement that an underlying process of ratiocination be established to link these phenomena.

Media users subjectively form action-guiding opinion for which they can give reasons. But the mind is excluded from effects studies of listening or viewing experience. Investigating audience thinking was displaced by so-called “two-step flow” effects research which evaded the media user’s subjective flow of ideas in coming to decisions. Positivist rather than realist in focus, these studies failed to elicit the trajectory of thought from media to audience action.

Media effects: agenda setting theory

In a further application of its “look and tell” approach, effects studies examined agenda setting – the capacity of newspapers and television to gain reader or audience consent to highlighted issues as important (or salient). Correlations were sought, for instance, between measurable media emphasis (e.g., the position of an item on a newspaper page) and

voters' beliefs about the importance of a topic. Speculation about the subjective process involved in readers making these judgments is not substantiated through analyzing media user accounts of their experience. Instead, quantifiable observable evidence is regarded methodologically as adequate to justify the claim that there is a connection between textual and reader recognition of an item's significance. High correlation of media emphasis and viewer perception of topic importance is considered sufficient to establish a causal relationship between media and audience agenda.

In short, seeking scientific status, positivist media studies discount subjectivity. Research is limited to the seen and heard. Within this restricted methodological vision, the "thin" data of positive statistical correlation between observable phenomena (e.g., "social class background," "time spent viewing") showed explanatory connections: there was no need to provide "thick" narratives of subjective evidence (e.g., a variety of audience voices linking levels of social class and screen consumption).

Quantitative *counts* exclude qualitative *accounts*. The broad focus involved in a researcher's establishing the duration and frequency of a recurring phenomenon (e.g., watching television) is not compatible with her or his simultaneous attention to detailed data (e.g., specific stories about switching on favored programs). The realist imperative to secure and study audience narratives which could provide their reasons for varying time spent viewing different programs went unheard within positivist media science. Researchers speculated on reader subjectivity, but did not engage in appropriate qualitative study. In subsequent media analysis (see Baker and Ball, 1969) aligned with this abstracting and deficient vision, where a mechanism or process is proposed between cause and effect (e.g., violence on screen and in the streets), that connection is demonstrably observable (e.g., physiological arousal in viewers).

The effects model: edging towards reality?

The evidence needed to demonstrate a causal connection between phenomena has become systematically contested in social science. Has being required to justify claims about the causal role of media driven the effects model from purely observational quantitative positivism to the edge of a subjectivist qualitative realism? In other words – as researchers thinking about television's effects, do we need to consider the audience's

thinking, the stories they tell about the complexities and consequences of watching programs? Are they persuaded – not pushed – to act by “stuff on screen”?

As we have seen (e.g., from Bryant and Thompson, 2002) positivism’s methodological prescription is that researchers focus on audience response as the effect of forceful screen content. Here, thought follows text as an accumulated or cultivated necessary consequence: “regular exposure to mediated violence made [*sic*] viewers develop an exaggerated view of real-life dangers in society” (183). But this doctrinal assumption of media causality with audience behavior thereby *made* to happen has continued coupled with an account of viewers who *choose* to subjectively identify with media characters and hence learn to act in particular ways. For positivists also espouse a “social learning model” of television effects: “viewers may identify with television roles and thus learn certain of the behaviors depicted” (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995: x).

People identify with *people* where both occupy a similar role. If we *actively* align ourselves with others on screen, how can our resulting behavior be regarded as a *passive* effect of media? Watching television, we amend attitudes (e.g., towards an ethnic group) through freely furthering *rational* thought (perhaps because we find our previous views are incompatible with new evidence). Our outlook is not *caused* to change as an effect of events on screen. People’s thinking is not pushed along by what they see on television.

Requirements for accuracy and consistency in our stories of subjective processes need to be satisfied. But there are additional difficulties for media effects theory seeking to incorporate audience alignment with others in causally accounting for the consequences of screen content. To assert that identification produces imitation and hence influence begs the question: imitation of *what*? Identification with a person terminating the life of a suffering partner in a television drama presupposes we view the action not as capricious cruelty but as charitable caring. Alignment assigns meaning which is then appropriated: identification actively interprets before it is influential. As media users we may engage in “behavior reenactment” or “modeling” (Bryant and Thompson, 2002: 70) of others’ activity on screen, but only after first identifying with it in a favorable light. Imitation involves actively understanding content positively in the process of identifying.

More widely, audiences identify with characters or presenters (such as news readers) themselves always already engaged in the role of interpreting

events on television. All seek sense. Media users align with those on screen in the *process* of establishing meaningful stories. But while this is a continuing shared focus of thought, may viewers not finally understand content differently from those persons seen on television also to be making sense of developments? Behavior regarded as the pursuit of justice by those “inhabiting” a program can be interpreted by media users in the last instance as disruptive. Identification in sense-seeking need not lead to imitation.

So, in summary, positivism faces two problems in seeing social learning as a media effect. First, in identifying with people on screen, *what* we learn to do is not a passive consequence but the result of our culturally informed continual active interpretation of content as worthwhile. Indeed Bryant and Thompson (inconsistently) acknowledge media user variation in “reading” content: “viewer perceptions and interpretations may conceivably render the most violent programs rather innocuous in their effects” (2002: 183). Second, identification is a complex process. While we can all align with characters (e.g., a detective) when we seek sense in events on screen, agreement may finally be absent on a concluding statement or *proposition* describing the result. One viewer’s perception of “amoral violence” in a program can be another’s diagnosis of “just retribution.” Clearly, differing behavioral consequences are likely to follow.

Of course, even if a story’s audience and narrative agents (characters) arrive at a shared perception of events in a program, they can disagree morally (or otherwise) over how to follow the latter’s implications for action (or as effects theorists would say, on “abstract modeling”). Confronted by violence recounted in a complex narrative on television, just what constitutes the same behavior in real life? Audience alignment with those on screen, sharing the process and agreeing on the product of interpretation, need not lead to an identical implementing of insight off screen. Their consensus that someone’s activity is courageous can be continued by viewers in different ways.

In short, Lowery and DeFleur argue that “people attend to, interpret, and respond to the content of mass communications selectively in ways influenced by their group memberships and social ties” (1995: 399). But it is difficult to see how the complex process of active audience interpretation and identification can be accommodated within effects studies’ positivist model of media use. For fundamentally the latter is centered on perceiving viewer response as a passive effect of content exclusively described by the researcher.

Conclusion

We started this chapter with an account of an active media user. Our Chinese Malaysian urban dweller selectively attended to and appropriated cellphone content from a family member: “it makes my day.” We hear her “integrating” media meaning into her “world-view” (Dahlgren, 1988: 287). She was critically alienated by other calls, perceiving them as irritating impositions of (probably patriarchal) power. Fundamentally challenging to theories of the “dominant text” (Abercrombie, 1996: 200), she is neither structuralism’s nor effects studies’ passive recipient of meaning. Listening to her, in chapter 2 we consider active media users as speaking subjects.