PART I

A CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH TO MEDIA

Theory

In this book, we offer a selection of critical discussions of mass media entertainment culture and new media to exemplify a powerful method of analysis that you will be able to apply on your own to other examples. In this way, we hope to promote and support critical media literacy. While there are many ways to think about media literacy, for the purposes of this book, we argue that in a postindustrial society in which public regulation of a for-profit media system is very weak, media literacy can be one tool to help limit the discursive power of media in our lives. While a high level of media literacy cannot replace other efforts to democratize our society’s economic and cultural resources, in our view, it does give audiences the skills necessary for analyzing and questioning the ideologies that often work at a subtextual level within media texts.

We begin with media theory because we think students will find it useful to have a good grasp of several central concepts illustrated in an introductory way here, before going on to tackle later readings in which an understanding of these concepts is often presumed. In the media theory section, we highlight especially the central concepts and terms of the field
of cultural studies as applied to mass media. As in all the other sections in this book, there are many ways in which the collected articles and essays in this section are in dialogue with one another. In these opening comments, we give only one possible reading of the ways in which their main themes connect.

We open with “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture,” by Douglas Kellner (I.1). This sets out the three-part approach to cultural studies (political economy/production, textual analysis, and audience reception/consumption) that characterizes this field. With Professor Kellner, we believe that to understand fully a media product such as a TV show or advertising image or online digital game, one ideally needs to be able to understand the socio-economic context in which it is created (political economy/production), analyze its constructed meaning(s) through careful attention to its particular visual/verbal/auditory languages or codes (textual analysis), and determine through ethnographic research what its real-world audiences contribute to the meaning-making process and even to the production and distribution of cultural products (audience consumption/production). In addition, Kellner points to the importance of better integrating considerations of gender, race, and class as categories of social analysis in cultural studies work in the future.

We begin with political economy because, above all, commercial entertainment is a profit-oriented business, largely controlled by giant corporations. According to media scholars David Croteau and William Hoynes (2006), media industries have changed dramatically along four dimensions over the past three decades:

1. **Growth.** Mergers and buyouts have made media corporations bigger than ever.

2. **Integration.** The new media giants have integrated either horizontally by moving into multiple forms of media, such as film, publishing, and radio, or vertically by owning different stages of production and distribution or both.

3. **Globalization.** To varying degrees, the major media conglomerates have become global entities, marketing their wares worldwide.

4. **Concentration of ownership.** As major players acquire more media holdings, the ownership of mainstream media has become increasingly concentrated (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006, 77).

This section of the book appropriately includes a chapter on media ownership by Dwayne Winseck (I.2), which can draw our attention at the outset to what is at stake when our national and international cultural production is so largely controlled by a few profit-oriented corporations. As he shows, even though in recent decades, new media outlets such as cable and satellite TV channels as well as the growth of the Internet have allowed for “a wider range of media available to a greater number of people than in the past” (p. 19), there is still ample cause to be concerned about media concentration, especially if we are concerned about increasing limitation on the number of voices and opinions we may be exposed to. Mega-media conglomerates still dominate much of the media culture produced for mass audiences, and Winseck’s analysis shows that “source diversity is shrinking.” He offers a list of reasons why, as citizens as well as media culture consumers, we need to be concerned with media ownership and concentration, concluding that the issue is “critical… with not only concerns of bias and the abuse of personalized power at stake, but the future of media evolution and potential of democracy itself” (p. 23).

In “The Meaning of Memory” (I.3), an important historical background piece that sheds light on how and why corporations came to so heavily dominate media culture in the United States, George Lipsitz shows how the needs of the national economy in the post–World War II period facilitated the development of mass television production. He explores how the increase in the sale of televisions and the development of a
Part I  A Cultural Studies Approach to Media: Theory

A group of situation comedies were used to transform a traditional, ethnic immigrant ideology that stressed values of community, thrift, and commitment to labor unions into an American Dream ideology that stressed individualism, consumerism, and suburban domesticity—values consistent with the needs of the expanding postwar capitalist economy.

James Lull (I.4) also focuses on the relationship between capitalism and ideology by discussing the neo-Marxist theory of hegemony developed by theorists such as Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and Stuart Hall, three thinkers who helped lay the foundation for critical cultural studies. Drawing on these theorists, Lull defines hegemony as “the power or dominance that one social group holds over others.” As Lull points out,

Owners and managers of media industries can produce and reproduce the content, inflections, and tones of ideas favorable to them far more easily than other social groups because they manage key socializing institutions, thereby guaranteeing that their points of view are constantly and attractively cast into the public arena. (p. 34)

This point is made explicit in Gareth Palmer's chapter (I.5) on the reality show Extreme Makeover: Home Edition. Palmer argues that this is one of a number of TV programs that are “becoming active elements, working practically and ideologically to change the world.” This show, in which individual homeowners are assisted in their quest for a dream home by neighbors and businesses, is likened to a fairy tale with a happily-ever-after ending. According to Palmer's analysis, this television text tries to render invisible what he calls “the massive cracks in the American Dream.” It does this by encoding the idea that government assistance no longer has any significant role to play in improving the lives of its citizens, a neoliberal theme that is also apparent in other media entertainment discussed in this book.

Although the hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism is expressed in a large number of contemporary texts, it is important to remind ourselves that it is not a completely dominant perspective throughout mass media. As cultural studies scholars often emphasize, drawing upon the complex concept of power famously articulated by Michel Foucault, competing voices and alternative perspectives always arise to contest the hegemonic formulations in an ongoing and decentralized struggle for superiority. Thus, even in a socially conservative time and place, there is always some space for more progressive (democratic) ideologies to be expressed.

Textual analysis of the ideological dimension in media entertainment, such as that provided by Palmer, is an important dimension of understanding how the text works, especially when linked with background knowledge about the producers' political and economic interests. However, there is still another element that students of media culture need to take into account. Irrespective of whether the media text appears to encode dominant or subversive cultural ideas, Kellner reminds us that as students of media culture, we cannot simply assume that we know how consumers of media texts actually read or decode them (constructing meaning from texts for themselves). For that piece of the equation, we must turn to studies of reception—how audiences consume media texts.

There is wide agreement among scholars that consumers of the media should not be conceptualized as mere passive pawns of media imagery, completely controlled by the dominant culture, but there are several different ways of understanding the activity of the audience. First, according to the influential concept of oppositional readings, initiated by Stuart Hall (also discussed by Kellner in I.1), the meaning of media texts cannot simply be established by one critic's decoding of the text—no matter how subtle and full—because all texts are to some degree “open” (polysemic, or capable of multiple meanings). Therefore, we must also
seek to know how audiences, both as individuals and as members of various communities, bring different experiences and complex identities to the processes of reading/viewing by which they actually feel, think about, and come to understand these texts. According to Hall's paradigm, readers or audience members may do one of three things in relation to the intended or preferred meanings encoded in the text: (1) accept them uncritically and read the text as its producers intended, (2) produce a negotiated reading (partially resisting the encoded meaning), or (3) create an oppositional reading of their own, completely rejecting the preferred meaning of the text.

Janice Radway's classic ethnographic research into the audience reception of romance novels was an early and influential study of how specific readers actually engage with a mass media text. In “Women Read the Romance” (I.6), Radway looked closely at how a group of White lower income women in the 1970s and 1980s negotiated with the genre of the romance novel, in terms of both the books they selected and the ways they actually read the text and appropriated and changed its meanings. Radway acknowledges that “romance reading...can function as a kind of training for the all-too-common task of reinterpreting a spouse's unsettling actions as the signs of passion, devotion, and love” (p. 52). Yet she sees, in these women’s selection of certain books as favorites and their rejection of others, an active tendency to critique certain patriarchal masculine behaviors, substituting an ideal of the “nurturing” male that might have been missing in their own family lives. Through the act of reading itself, she argued, this group of women romance readers escaped temporarily from familial demands on their time, and Radway interprets this action as potential resistance to or refusal to accept completely the patriarchal restrictions of their lives. While encouraging respect for women’s own experiences as cultural consumers, however, Radway warns that we should not confuse modes of resistance that reside in textual consumption (and therefore consciousness alone) with more practical, real-world modes of resistance (such as organized protest against the patriarchal abuses women like these met in real life).

Radway’s work helped establish the field of audience studies, which has since developed into a rich body of research and interpretation. At the same time, over the past two decades or so, a distinct subfield of audience study has emerged, devoted to one particularly active kind of text consumer, the fan. In an early and very influential essay, “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching” (I.7), Henry Jenkins drew our attention to “a largely unexplored terrain of cultural activity, a subterranean network of readers and writers who remake [media texts] in their own image.” For Jenkins and many who have been influenced by his work,

“Fandom” is a vehicle for marginalized subterranean groups (women, the young, gays, etc.) to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations; it is a way of appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests, a way of transforming mass culture into a popular culture. (p. 58)

Drawing on his studies of fans organized around their mutual appreciation of the long-running television series centered on space exploration by a team of diverse characters, Jenkins brought to light a fascinating body of fan fiction written for the most part by female fans, whom he conceptualized as reluctant poachers who steal only those things that they truly love, who seize televisual property only to protect it against abuse by those who have created it and who have claimed ownership over it. In embracing popular texts, the fans claim those works as their own, remaking them in their own image...Consumption becomes production; reading becomes writing; spectator culture becomes participatory culture. (p. 64)
Following Jenkins’s lead, contemporary fandom studies foreground the agency and creativity of culture consumers who go on to produce their own cultural materials, often through such “poaching” of ideas and materials from the original mass-produced texts. New digital technologies have clearly added to the opportunities available to do-it-yourself cultural producers outside the commercial world of the media industries, including fans. Moreover, some fans have taken advantage of social networking programs on the Internet to facilitate not only their own fan networking but also a more politicized fan activism to protect favorite mass media culture texts from fates such as cancellation. (See Part VIII for examples of these kinds of fan activity and fan activism.)

Some critical media theorists have warned (as Kellner does) of the dangers of overemphasizing the power of media audiences to resist or effectively challenge the dominant ideologies that normalize social and economic inequities, simply through their activities as consumers—even if they become activist fans. We would agree that broader political efforts are still necessary to pressure mainstream producers and owners to create and distribute different kinds of representations. Certainly, achieving a more democratic system of media ownership and access will require a very high and sustained level of citizen activism—including working to change public media policies favoring corporate control, such as the deregulation of broadcast media. Still, for those interested in the relationship of media to cultural democracy, active audiences and media activism are welcome exercises of media consumer power.

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