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How to cite:

Toynbee, Jason (2008). Media making and social reality. In: Hesmondhalgh, David and Toynbee, Jason eds. The Media and Social Theory. Culture, Economy and the Social (1). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, pp. 265–279.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

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Chapter 16

Media Making And Social Reality

Jason Toynbee

In David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee (eds.) *The Media and Social Theory*.
London: Routledge (2008), pp. 265-279

Consider the long running argument in media scholarship about the comparative importance of the two ‘moments’ of communication: reception and production.¹ We know that each position has a distinct theoretical approach. So broadly speaking, audience research (located in cultural studies) is premised on relativism and constructionism, whereas work on production (the political economy tradition) draws on a materialist view of the world. These intellectual approaches are not only intellectual of course. Behind them is a division of labour such that academics in the field tend to work on just one moment. As a result intellectual partisanship and professional self-interest reinforce each other, and positions become embedded. Now in one sense this is just another story of specialism in the academy. But what marks out media studies is that even as they occupy their ‘own’ moment, specialists frequently claim it as *the* moment, that it trumps the other in significance, and encompasses the fullest meaning of the media. In other words, there is a kind of hegemonic thrust in each of these two branches.²

I say this at the outset because I take a partisan position myself in this chapter. I begin by arguing for the precedence of production, and then examine what that precedence means for media making. In putting the case I draw on ideas from critical realist philosophy and social theory, a body of work which has hardly been taken up in media studies.³ What critical realism brings to this undertaking is explanatory power, a metatheoretical setting

¹ Many thanks to David Hesmondhalgh for help with this chapter, both in discussion beforehand and in editing as I clawed my way to a final draft.

² I have not mentioned textual analysis which forms a third, would-be hegemonic position in media studies. There is no space to discuss it properly as a position here, although there certainly will be discussion of texts and textuality.

³ However, see Raymond Lau’s (2004) important article on news production for a

of the media in society that helps to clarify the premises of rival approaches in media studies as well as differences and convergences among them. More than that, realism contributes to understanding how the media are implicated in human oppression, and its converse, the struggle for emancipation. It has a political dimension in other words.

CRITICAL REALISM AND THE PRECEDENCE OF PRODUCTION

Realists assert the existence of things independently of the means of knowing them. Behind this bald statement, however, lurk several philosophical tendencies and, associated with them, distinct realist ontologies, or theories of existence. In what follows I will draw on the critical realism (CR) of Roy Bhaskar and others, which, apart from its cogency, can be recommended because it deals directly with the problems of *social* realism (see Bhaskar 1998). One of the key issues here is that society is ‘concept dependent’ as Bhaskar puts it (1998: 38, 45, 49). In other words it involves discourse. What we think and say (and critically, what the media represent to us) contribute to the constitution of the social.⁴ In this sense CR, just like cultural studies, has a cultural constructionist conception of human life. What radically demarcates CR from cultural studies, however, is that it posits a social existence which extends beyond discourse and experience to include causes and powers we cannot directly apprehend, and most often do not consider.

Let’s see what this might mean for understanding the significance of the media moments. A cultural studies approach to the audience begins and ends with lived experience. Look at the growing body of ethnographic work in audience studies. Much of this suggests that a high degree of self-conscious activity is involved in watching television. Such conditions also seem to apply to new media (see Livingstone 2004 for a survey and discussion of the literature). This is undoubtedly an important and compelling strand of

pioneering example.

⁴ This means that the realist claim for the existence of the world independently of means of knowing it needs to be modified in the case of the social, as opposed to the natural, world. On the one hand, society indeed has a dimension of ‘existential intransitivity’, that is it exists as an object of inquiry (and becomes manifestly intransitive as we examine it in the past; no amount of re-interpretation changes what went before). On the other hand, knowledge production has consequences for the constitution of society and vice versa, hence there is ‘causal interdependency’ between discourse and the social (Bhaskar 1998: 47-8; see also Sayer 2000: 10-11).

research. In CR, however, the experience of actors is only a part of social being. Underneath, as it were, are real structural-causal factors which may not be directly experienced. That being the case it is surely better to start with a procedure which can tap those factors, rather than with a method like ethnography whose scope is necessarily limited to the experiential.

CR has just such a procedure – the transcendental argument. A transcendental argument is one in which the following question is asked. ‘What are the pre-conditions for the possibility of x , where x is a more or less widely accepted phenomenon?’ If we take the media as x , then it quickly becomes apparent that the presence of the audience, just as much as production, is a necessary condition for media to be possible. Remove either of the moments and we no longer have anything that would qualify as the media. Looking more closely it becomes clear that what is at stake here are *relations* between moments. In other words, production and reception acquire their constitutive character as media moments through their mutual orientation.

However, to take the next step, and make the case for the *precedence* of production, involves more concrete analysis than the relatively abstract question of the *existence* of media moments. In taking that step I would suggest that we cross a line from the level of metatheory to that of substantive sociological inquiry (for a useful discussion of this distinction see Sibeon 2004: 12-23). If this is so than a transcendental argument will have less purchase. Quite simply, to examine a phenomenon concretely is to show its many aspects (Lawson 1998a: 170), and thus to pose a multiplicity of pre-conditions for its existence. That makes it harder to pinpoint which ones are decisive. What to do then? How should we approach the problem of assessing the significance of production against the other media moments?

The response of empiricism – the dominant tradition in the social sciences – would be to seek event regularities of the sort, when x happens then y happens, and in this way demonstrate a law governing a particular social process or event. But critical realism is sceptical about this method. For in the ‘open systems’ which constitute social reality one cannot produce closed experimental conditions like those created in the natural sciences. And without isolation of variables there can be no satisfactory testing of their correlation. Anyway, as Roy Bhaskar suggests, empiricism does not even try to explain what it

demonstrates. To present correlations is to do little more than posit what may well be contingent regularities, while ignoring the really important issue of the causes which generate observable events (Bhaskar 1998: 45-6).

There has of course been an empiricist case made for the priority of production, namely in so-called 'effects' research. In its most politically significant (and pernicious) strand, regularities are posed between the broadcasting of violent television programmes and violent behaviour among viewers. The latter is said to be an effect of the former. Now my sense would be that many readers of this book will be unsympathetic to such a position. Critique of crass empiricism of the sort involved in effects research is quite extensive in media studies, and is taken up in political economy as well as in cultural studies. But I think it is still worth sketching a specifically CR critique of 'effects', both because it interrogates empiricism quite rigorously, and because it suggests an alternative approach to understanding the significance of production.

What's wrong with effects research is that it does not acknowledge the open-ness of media in society, considered as a system. There is simply no way of isolating the watching of media violence among a complex of putative causes of violent behaviour among research subjects. Thus any correlation shown between the two (media and violence) may be contingent. More than this, even if one were to accept a causal link, there are no means to establish the direction of causality between correlates. In a study claimed as the first to show long term effects from childhood watching to violent behaviour in adulthood, the authors can say only that, 'it is more plausible that exposure to TV violence increases aggression than that aggression increases TV-violence viewing' (Huesmann et al. 2003: 216). Plausibility, of course, depends on some conception of social causality *outside* the event regularity that is supposed to do the explanatory work.

As an account of the primacy of production, then, empiricism fails. But the appeal to plausibility, just mentioned, does at least point a way forward. What's needed is some notion of the salience of social causes. Even if one cannot *prove* the crowning significance of a particular factor among many, it might be possible to begin to understand how social phenomena exist through illuminating contrast. This is the proposal of Tony Lawson. He suggests that social science

aims to identify single sets of causal mechanisms and structures. And these are

indicated where outcomes or features of different groups are such that, given the respective causal histories and conditions of these groups, their observed relation is other than might have been expected' (1998b: 150-1).

Lawson calls these types of indicative social phenomena 'contrastive demi-regularities' or 'demi-regs' for short (1998b: 151-162). Demi-regs are good enough regularities through which one can plausibly infer that significant causes are at work. The point about the contrastive dimension is then that it gestures towards explanation through alternatives. In other words, it begs the question: 'what factors are at work in this case rather than that one?' This would seem to be an approach well suited to considering the salience of media production just because different kinds of producer roles are at stake in different kinds of communication.

Fortunately, there is already a contrastive analysis of communication we can draw on, namely John Thompson's discussion of 'face to face interaction', 'mediated interaction', and 'mediated quasi-interaction' (1995, 81-118). The first type, (everyday talk) is fundamentally dialogical. The second (telephone conversations, exchanges of letters and the like) is dialogical, but also mediated. In the third category (mass media), there are two distinguishing factors. Firstly, 'symbolic forms are produced for an indefinite range of potential recipients' rather than specific others. Secondly, communication is generally one-way. 'The reader of a book, for instance, is primarily the recipient of a symbolic form whose producer does not require (and generally does not receive) a direct and immediate response' (84). Of course, as Thompson goes on to argue, indirect responses to media do occur. Indeed they are central to the very nature of the media as a social phenomenon (98-118). Still, for our purposes his typology establishes good enough demi-regs. In contrasting the three types of communication we can say that what distinguishes the mass media from other forms of symbolic communication is the temporal primacy of production, premised on monologue from one to many.

This may seem laboured. But I make the argument carefully because I take seriously the objection from cultural studies to what seems to be implied by the conclusion just reached. Broadly, cultural studies has it that the audience makes use of media texts in such a rich variety of ways that the *prima facie* case for the precedence of production is negated. Audiences make texts their own. This is a strong suit. But the realist response would be simply that, *unlike in the case of dialogue*, however broad and deep the

interpretation is, it is an interpretation based on a given – the text as produced – and there are no direct means of shaping the next text from producers.⁵ In other words, media producers can make decisions about the nature of communication without recourse to the opinions of those who attend. Further, the fact that media monologue is organised on a one to many basis implies hierarchical producer-audience relations; a privileged few have the capacity to speak and show to the many.

MEDIA STRUCTURE / SOCIAL STRUCTURE

If, as I have just been arguing, producers have precedence to the extent that they control the form and content of the media monologue, perhaps the first questions to ask are, how is production organised and what shapes its output. To address them we can turn to CR social theory, at the heart of which is a view of society based on structure and agency. We will deal with agency in the next section. Here the focus will be on structure.

As Douglas Porpora (1998) puts it, social structures exist as ‘systems of human relations among social positions’. A Marxist conception, where system is mode of production and social positions are classes, would fit this bill. So would systems of patriarchy and racial exclusion; they all depend on positions in socially significant relation (1998: 343). Crucially, structures are causal mechanisms. That is, they are not merely heuristic devices, or means of understanding the world, rather they belong to the world, and have real causal powers.⁶ Thus workers work and capitalists exploit their workers by dint of the capital-labour relation. Similarly, television producers make programmes and people watch them as a consequence of the media relations that we examined in the previous section.

It is worth reflecting on what this media structure does and does not entail. As we saw,

⁵ Market apologists argue that the market and market research feed back the opinions of the audience to production units. Still, even if one grants the market with such a feedback effect (and there are many reasons to doubt its efficacy) this is in no way comparable to the communicative conditions of dialogue.

⁶ If this sounds worryingly metaphysical then, as Andrew Sayer suggests, we can find reassurance in the fact that ‘many mechanism are *ordinary*, often being identified in ordinary language by transitive verbs, as in “they *built up* a network of political connections”’ (2000: 14).

producers can control the form and content of media texts without recourse to the audience. Further, media are organised on a one-to-many basis. Together these factors would seem to offer producers large amounts of power over audiences. Certainly, much of the work on media production (as well as the first wave of studies of the audience in the 1930s and 40s) has endorsed a strong view of media power. But the question is, does monological media structure, considered purely on its own terms, justify the strong view?

In the first place, producers do have the *facility* to try to persuade audiences of things – this is implied in the monological structure of the media. We can usefully refer to speech act theory in order to tease out what such a facility involves. J. L. Austin calls ‘perlocutionary’ those utterances in ordinary language which are intended to ‘produce certain consequential effects’ among the audience (1975: 101). Effectively, all utterances have a perlocutionary dimension, and by extension so do media texts. Journalists want their audience to be informed, rock musicians want theirs to be transfixed, and so on and so forth.

Immediately, though, we need to make some qualifications. As Austin points out, perlocution can ‘misfire’ leading to unintended consequences, or it can just fail to achieve any effects at all. In fact there are many and complex variations on these themes (103-132). The implication for media production is that power over the audience is relatively weak. Mediated interaction then further weakens this power. Quite simply, it is hard to get feedback about what effects you are having on audience members due to your spatial/temporal dislocation from them.⁷ That makes it difficult to adjust production and so reduce misfires. And there is something else; the monological and perlocutionary structure of the media explains nothing about interest and content, in other words what might influence producers to make specific texts with a view to getting audiences to think, or do particular things. These points are absolutely crucial. Media producers *qua* producers have relatively little power over audiences, and no particular interest in persuading them of anything, except perhaps that the media are to be trusted. Even in this last case it is difficult to infer very much without some notion of the social animus of the media. To derive such a notion, we need an account of the *complex* of social structures

⁷ A related issue is the event-regularities problem in empiricist research which we discussed earlier. Media commissioned audience research suffers from this as much as academic empiricist work.

which impacts on media production, and which in turn media production acts back upon.

In CR, social reality is stratified. At the top are experiences (the *empirical* domain), which form a subset of all the events that occur yet may not necessarily be experienced (the *actual* domain). Both categories are in turn the product of causal mechanisms which in society, as we have seen, take the form of social structures (this is the domain of the *real*) (Collier 1994: 42-5, Sayer 2000: 11-12). But stratification does not end with these three nested domains of the empirical, actual and real. Structures themselves may provide the basis for other structures. The notion of basis is crucial in CR. It indicates a 'without which not' condition such that, for instance, the commercial media could not exist without a capitalist mode of production. The parochial social relations of media making depend on this material base – for example, the structure of competition for status among symbol makers which Bourdieu (1996) identifies in the 'field of literary production' in nineteenth century France. But we can also note a higher economic level, namely specific media sectors with their own particular organisation and imperatives. These of course depend on the capitalist mode of production too. Above the social and economic we have semiotic structures, through which are generated actual media practices and texts. Semiotic structures depend on the kinds of social structure just mentioned, but also on biological and physical mechanisms lower down in stratified reality – for instance the seeing, hearing, touching, motor and cognitive mechanisms of human beings.

Upward causality is not monolithic however. In other words, lower level structures constrain, enable and influence higher ones, but they do not fully determine them. CR explains this through 'emergence', whereby higher level strata have a certain autonomy in relation to lower ones (Bhaskar 1998: 97-9). Thus the social depends on the biological embodiment of human beings, yet exists as a distinct level of reality with its own tendencies. The key point is that in all instances of emergence, two or more elements from a lower level are *reconfigured*, so that a new entity is formed at a higher level with powers that are proper to it (Elder-Vass 2005). Frequently, emergence is associated with the acting back of higher upon lower levels. For example, in the case of speaking, psycho-semiotic mechanisms, emergent from the neurological processes of the brain, direct the larynx and tongue to produce meaningful sound.

Critically, emergence enables a depth ontology, but without reductionism, that is the explanation of higher levels purely in terms of lower and more fundamental ones. Against reduction, emergence offers an understanding of reality in which the future resonates with possibilities. What's more, in the context of this chapter, it enables us to treat media making as a relatively autonomous structure and practice, though one that is always shaped and constrained by the powers of other mechanisms below and above it.

So far we have been examining the vertical stratification of reality. But as is already starting to become clear, shaping and constraining is also the product of the 'horizontal' conjunction of generative structures at any level. In some cases the powers of a particular structure will cancel out, or predominate over, the powers of another. In other cases mechanisms will work conjointly in a positive way. It follows that we must refer to a particular historical conjuncture of structures at different levels – some negative, others positive in their effect – in order to explain the *actual* production of media, at the level of events.

To do that work we need to shift analytical gear again, from metatheory to substantive sociological analysis. Here I would simply argue for a class/race/gender model, such that the capital-labour structure has great salience, but so do sex-gender and racialised identity relations. These are the big three structures which have a major impact on media making. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the multiple horizontal and vertical causality we have been discussing, we know that outcomes will be produced in complex and relatively inconsistent ways: demi-regs rather than law governed patterns. And of course the large structures do not exhaust causality. Other significant structures interact with the big three. Some are politically charged (just like class, sex-gender and race), that is they are structures of domination which work against the possibility of human emancipation (see Bhaskar 1991). In other cases, for instance the structure of the media themselves, structural relations involve little or no politics *per se*, in which case the political will be more or less completely overdetermined by the conjunction of other mechanisms in which political interests are at stake.

The concrete question of how, in a particular historical conjuncture, the media then take on a political complexion and represent, or sometimes resist, dominant interests brings

us back to the more familiar terrain of critical media studies. Here we can identify a continuum I think. At one end is political economy which examines relatively specific forms of causality, namely from the structure of the media sector within the capitalist economy, to the decisions made by media producers. At the other end is ideology critique which is concerned to show at a meta level how the whole ensemble of power relations determines the broad ideological landscape, including media representation. In the late 1970s Peter Golding and Graham Murdock (1979) argued persuasively that analysis of the media based on ideology – the emerging cultural studies tradition of Stuart Hall and others – failed to take account of the concrete linkages between mode of production, sectoral organisation of the media, and professional codes of media makers. In the absence of such a focus, the ideological approach had to rely solely on inference from textual analysis for its account of how power relations become inscribed in media output. This was in effect ‘circumstantial evidence’ about media power (224). My point would be that via a CR social ontology which brings together structures (and not only economic structures), ontological depth and horizontal conjunction we avoid having to choose between macro- and micro-causality, between inference from text and from causal linkage. Instead we can use both approaches. Indeed we *ought* to use both because the complexity of media-society relations and the fallibility of knowledge calls for multiple perspectives (Sayer 2000: 51-5).

AGENCY, INTENTION AND AUTONOMY

The argument of the last section was that media making has a perlocutionary dimension which, of itself, is both weak and empty. The need was then to establish how in their complex conjunction social structures overdetermine media making. But this still leaves out the critical issue of the way media production *emerges* from society, how its practices are relatively autonomous. In approaching that problem we need to consider the agency of producers. Roy Bhaskar has a theory of structure and agency which can help with this. He develops it through a critique of classical sociology (1998: 31-7).

In the first place he agrees with Durkheim that social structure pre-exists the individual, being ‘always already made’. However, he also accepts Weber’s proposal that society exists only through the activity of individuals. Peter Berger had argued that these two views could be reconciled; individual and society are simply moments in a single

‘dialectical’ process. But for Bhaskar this is an ‘illicit identification’. For if one accepts the ‘always already made’ condition, ‘it is no longer true to say that men *create* society. Rather one must say: they *reproduce* or *transform* it’ (1998: 33-4). This is the basis of Bhaskar’s ‘transformational model of social activity’ (TMSA). Activity and social structure are mutually constitutive, yet ontologically distinct. On one side, social structure consists in relations between people, and depends on their activities, activities which reproduce or (less often) transform it. On the other side, human practice depends on society, such that there can be no meaningful action without social structure. A key point follows. Structure enables and imposes limits on what people can do, yet by the same token it never fully determines actions. Agency is emergent from structure – and vice versa.

Bhaskar goes on to articulate this structure-agency duality, showing that each side consists in a second duality. ‘Society is both the ever-present *condition* (material cause) and the continually produced *outcome* of human agency. And praxis is both work, that is conscious *production*, and (normally unconscious) *reproduction* of the conditions of production, that is society’ (34-5). How does this double duality map on to the making of media? So far we have been considering media structure as a set of relations between producers and audience. In order to understand how media texts get made we need to move in closer and consider production itself. Let’s take the example of situation comedy. On the *structure* side, relations between genre conventions, as well as the division of labour, enable sit-coms to be made (condition). Yet these same relations only exist through their continued practice by script writers, actors, directors and so on (outcome). Over on the *action* side, the production team put together shows for their own reasons, such as the desire to make people laugh (production). But to produce a sitcom also involves reiterating the genre structure and division of labour (reproduction).

Clearly, structure can be transformed as well as reproduced. We know that transformation is extremely difficult in the big social structures like capitalism and patriarchy. The interests of the powerful in preserving the status quo become deeply embedded. However in situation comedy, and media making more generally, transformation happens all the time. One of the most illuminating strands of media studies research in the last twenty years has been concerned with that problem; the hybridisation of genres, changing narrative conventions, emerging styles in popular music and so on. The TMSA helps to make sense of this process along the following lines: a

change in production yields a new outcome which then becomes a condition for the next moment of production, which yields a new outcome ... and so it goes. In effect, transformation in the structure of a genre is achieved through many cycles of the TMSA, each yielding an incremental shift in structural relations.⁸

Whether or not producers reflect on such processes of generic change, they clearly have intentions when they work. How far are intentions efficacious though? Bhaskar's response is unambiguous. Any theory of agency worth the name must pose reasons as the cause of action (1998: 90-7). People think they act intentionally and for reasons, and there is every reason to conclude that they are right. Reasons include beliefs and desires, as well as calculations about the consequences of actions. Nevertheless, intention is sometimes thwarted by 'sources of opacity in social life' which make reasoned action less effective, namely unconscious motivation, tacit skills, unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences (1991: 75). It seems to me that this formulation of agency as intentional, yet also limited by the opacity of social being, is incredibly useful in understanding media production.

For there is a major contradiction about it. On the one hand, production tends towards a kind of institutional autonomy (in this connection, see Matt Stahl's analysis of rock music in the present volume). That is, the agency of producers is recognised and enshrined by the media industries for the functional reason that symbol making is highly variable, intuitive and therefore not amenable to detailed administration.⁹ On the other hand, a number of strategies are used to pull producers back under the discipline of the market and ideological control, from the 'soft' supervision of cultural brokers, to the brutal use of short term contracts and the lure of deferred payment. In this difficult situation coping discourses tend to develop. At one end of the spectrum, among rock musicians for example, romantic notions arise of the artist embattled against commerce. This is a refusal of the nature of cultural labour. At the other end, among television journalists for instance, are codes of media professionalism which confer integrity on producers despite their co-optation by industry. All these involve some kind of denial of the structural

⁸ For a discussion of stylistic change in reggae music, and the role of Bob Marley in it, which uses the TMSA see Toynbee (2007).

⁹ Of course this tendency varies enormously in degree and kind across the media industries. There are also economic factors at play to do with offloading risk on to producers.

conditions of media making, or else a shying away from the consequences of production practice, namely that you always embed external influences in 'your own' creative artefacts.

So, there is a peculiar combination of strong agency, structural constraint and high opacity amongst media practitioners. This is key in explaining how media making can be instrumental, in other words subject to market control or more broadly influenced by powerful social forces, and yet at the same time can exist as a zone of relative autonomy and counter-intuitive expression. It is precisely such a contradiction, and the ambiguity which follows from it, that legitimates media power in capitalist formal democracies. To the extent that the media are trusted and granted perlocutionary 'rights' by audiences it is because they don't see producers as mere puppets of advertisers or the ruling class. And at least sometimes, or to some extent, they are right about this.

PRODUCTION IS ABOUT THE WORLD

None of the above tells us what media making is about though. To say that production is perlocutionary and has an ideological component (serving the interests of power) is to stop short of the problem of reference. Generally, outside of critical work on political communication, media studies has tended to avoid this issue. It is not an oversight, of course, but rather part of a political project. The whole thrust of textual analysis has been away from understanding media in terms of its reference to things, and towards the notion that media construct discourses, images, ways of thinking.¹⁰ Certainly, there is progressive intent here: media makers and audiences should be freed from the tyranny of reductionism. Or to put this view in its strongest form; saying that media texts are about the world is to connive with the powerful who want to fix things as they are, and deny the creative imagination of the people.

Actually, the anti-reference tendency extends well beyond media studies. It is, for example, strongly represented in Bourdieu's work on literary production. In an essay on 'Flaubert's point of view' Bourdieu argues that the key to understanding it is to

¹⁰ Tobin Nellhaus (1998) points to the basis of this trend in cultural theory's wholesale adoption of Saussurian semiology. Saussure's 'signified' has no object. Conversely, reference is central to Pierce's semiotics (2-3). Nellhaus goes on to develop a compelling synthesis of CR social ontology and the Piercian system of semiotics in this article.

appreciate how the novelist placed himself between realist authors and writers of genre literature. At stake here is a strategy based on position taking in the field: not this style, not that form of words, not those themes (Bourdieu 1996: 87-91). As Bourdieu goes on to say, what makes Flaubert's work so original 'is that it makes contact, at least negatively, with the totality of the literary universe in which it is inscribed' (1996: 98).

But this is surely to turn cultural production into something completely self-referential. Form and theme are significant only to the extent that they can be related homologically to the structure of the field. Imagine carrying the homological method across to, say, popular music. We would have no way of understanding songs in terms of their reference to people, places, emotions, relationships ... even power; no inkling that vocal style might have significance because of its sensuous performance of the human body. The rejection of reference is mistaken then. More, I would suggest it is politically dangerous, because we lose any sense of the truth or adequacy to reality of media texts.

In order to reinstate the problem of reference we can turn once again to an argument about the nature and consequences of media structure. It is this: just as perlocution is entailed by producer-audience relations, reference is entailed by producer-world relations.¹¹ Media makers tend to be objective, because their work is oriented outwards, in the direction of people and things. A game show is about a game between contestants; the news is about current events of a certain kind; a feature film has a fictional story about people in recognisable social and geographical locations. In his essay, 'In defence of objectivity' Andrew Collier makes a case for the 'essential other-directedness of human mental acts and processes' (2003: 138). But if this is true of experience in general, it is emphatically so with the media which are offered to us just as means of showing and telling about the world *beyond mere hearsay*. Indeed, the objectivity of media is a significant public value, enshrined in codes of media practice, and embedded in the everyday hermeneutics which people in the audience bring to bear on media texts.

Of course critical researchers have rightly been suspicious about the ease with which media producers can undermine the objectivity that is posed by media-world relations. And I entirely agree that the influence of systemic social power is constantly directed

¹¹ The two are linked in that reference is the aim of perlocution. Audiences should get to see, hear, feel and understand things in the world.

towards subverting the media's witness in the interests of the powerful. What's more, that influence frequently prevails. But in this context to deny the possibility of reference is both mistaken in fact, and an act of political conservatism. For without at least some understanding of the world via the media we surely cannot hope to transform its iniquitous structures of power. The point here is not that the media could ever provide us with certain knowledge. This would be the case even in a hypothetical world where there was no systemic pressure on media producers to distort objective accounts of the world. For all ways of knowing (CR social theory as much as media artifacts) are socially produced and historically changing. In CR, then, epistemological relativism is a necessary consequence of a realist ontology.

Yet that relativism does not mean all ways of knowing should be equally good. For whenever we encounter knowledge or reference to the world we have to make a decision about its adequacy. Thus judgemental rationality is the necessary counterpart to the fallibility of knowledge (Bhaskar 1991: 153-4). And that in turn means we need to hold media makers and owners to account for what texts get made. A politically engaged media studies must be concerned with how far and how adequately the media refer to the world – not only in news and current affairs, but in music, drama, even reality TV.

As I started to think through what a realist take on media texts might involve a couple of years ago, I feared that some dourly serious and reductive analytical work would be called for. But I shouldn't have worried. For reality is complex and always changing, while the media's reference to it is necessarily provisional given the fallible, perspectival nature of knowledge. Realist textual analysis thus has the character of being serious as life itself, while at the same time being preoccupied with the camp, the piteous, the polemical, satirical, absurd, fantastic The list of objective qualities you might need to consider is a long one.

CONCLUSIONS

I began by announcing an argument for the precedence of production. Through bringing to bear CR social theory, the chapter would examine the implications of that precedence for media making. Now I think we are in a position to draw some conclusions. There are four of them.

1. Precedence means that production comes first in time in that well known series of producer-text-audience. To make a text is to limit the terms and conditions of its meaning at Time 1 so that when the text is interpreted by the audience at Time 2 it will be with some of its perlocutionary meaning intact. The logic of this is both inexorable and fuzzy; inexorable because once composed media texts are objects with real causal powers. The fuzziness arises because these causal powers are opaque to some extent – unintended meanings may arise both at production and, particularly, at reception. What such fuzzy logic suggests for media studies is that we ought to recognise the temporal/causal chain, in other words that things start with production located within a specific conjuncture of social relations. Yet that precedence of production does not mean that it is more important as a research topic than the audience. How could it be so? The perlocutionary structure of the media poses not only causes but also effects, namely the audience interpreting texts. It follows that specialization within media studies is only legitimate for the practical reason that there is a limit to the number of things you can know about in any depth. In general, media researchers ought to be considering the critical problem of media-in-society, even and especially when they are focussing on their ‘own’ media moment.

2. The monological (one way) and hierarchical (few to many) structure of the media does not necessarily entail powerful media. Misfires and failures ensure that meanings often do not get through, and media organisations find it hard to measure the perlocutionary hit rate among the audience. As for the hierarchical aspect, this can only be understood in the context of power relations in society: the media are located in a complex nexus of social structures which exert and reproduce power, though never, given the open-ness of the social system, in predictable and regular ways. In sum, powerful interests influence and inflect media making, and this is the central problem we need to address when we consider the question of media power.

3. The agency of producers, and the special autonomy they have as cultural workers in capitalist formal democracies, produces a contradiction. On the one hand autonomy merely legitimates the authority of the media among the audience. On the other hand it is substantive, and means that producers are sometimes and to some extent able to make texts independently of market pressures or other forms of external influence. More

generally, autonomy constitutes a form of emergence on which is premised the possibility of all kinds of structural transformation. While genre structures frequently change (CR's transformational model of social activity can help to show us how), social structures are difficult to transform. Still, the possibility and need for radical social change persist, and critical media studies should therefore keep a constant eye on how media producers make a difference to our understanding of that possibility and that need.

4. Producer-world relations pose the essentially objective character of the media. However, if producers treat things in the world, then by the same token they can make falsely objective texts. This may be inadvertent or, more rarely, intentional (i.e. some form of deception). In either case it is often the result of the influence of powerful interests. Because of this capacity of the media to both represent and distort reality there is a need for textual analysis which will itself be driven by an ethic of objectivity.

None of the above are new points of course. They have all been made before in media studies. However, I think that CR gives them a more rigorous standing – and perhaps enables a synthesis of positions which can take us beyond the war of the media moments to a new kind of critical media studies. In any event, that surely has to be the goal as reality bites, and jolts even those among us who still dream that in media, as in life itself, we simply dream.

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