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British Cultural Studies, Active Audiences and the Status of Cultural Theory

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An Interview with David Morley

Huimin Jin

Abstract

British cultural studies, represented perhaps chiefly by the so-called Birmingham School, is much marked by its strong orientation towards the application of grounded theory in the analysis of concrete cases, rather than the development of abstract Theory with a Capital T (in Stuart Hall's words). As a leading figure of the Birmingham School and a key representative of the active audience model in television studies, or broadly, media studies, David Morley stands at a point where this trend was set, as is evidenced in this interview. Questioned by Huimin Jin, Morley puts his audience studies into the contexts of British cultural studies, postmodernism, Marxism, social movements, and so on; and in doing so, he shows the ambiguity, and subtlety of his concepts of how to best *theorize* the active audience. Only by this method, Jin believes, could Morley launch his version of audience studies, which aims not to invent a general theory of media effects, but to use an interdisciplinary range of theories to explore how people actually respond to a TV programme; and only by this approach to audience studies, furthermore, could Morley develop a theory of the audience's activity, which is embedded in the course of their everyday life and that cannot be thoroughly colonized by discourses. Cultural studies, wherever it is conducted, therefore, Morley suggests, has to construct modes of analysis that are relevant to its own conditions of production in a particular place, at a particular time. This is the tradition, as we know it, but also the future, as Morley envisages, of cultural studies.

HUIMIN JIN (hereafter HJ): To begin with, I should say thanks for your accepting my interview, Professor David Morley. As one of the leading figures of British cultural studies, represented, perhaps we could say, chiefly by the so-called Birmingham School, you should be, I believe, in a good position to clarify some issues about which I am quite curious, concerning the historical development of this school. More importantly, I am rather keen to know from your own perspective your special contribution to British cultural studies, either in a Hall-centred mode or in a broader sense. Well, my first question is about popular culture.

Recently, scholars with Manchester Metropolitan University have shown a tendency to narrow cultural studies down to popular culture studies. By doing so, they foreground and intensify popular culture as a primary arena of cultural studies. This is related to the British tradition of cultural studies, from Williams's definition of culture as a way of life, via the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) subculture researches, to the course on Popular Culture (U203) run by the Open University from 1982 to 1987. You were invited to contribute a course unit on 'Interpreting Television' for this historically significant programme. As to the ever-expanding field of popular culture studies as an academic enterprise, my concern is given to such questions as why academics should take it seriously in the British context, and if it has something specific to do with a politics of culture, say, to the turn to Gramsci, or to, anthropologically, our everyday life, in which it has an enabling, transformative force.

David Morley (hereafter DM): I see no reason at all why cultural studies should now concentrate exclusively on popular culture. Indeed, in my view, it is crucial that cultural studies also attend to middle-brow and high-brow culture, as these forms and their changing characteristics can only be understood in relation to each other. At the point of cultural studies' inception, however, the position was very different. At that moment, it was widely assumed that popular culture was not worthy of theorists' attentions. So the initial focus on popular culture was a polemical move, in a particular context, designed to show that popular culture was a field that was indeed well worth studying. However, nowadays, that point is generally accepted so it doesn't need to be stressed so much. So, to narrow cultural studies' focus down to only popular culture would be a very regressive move in the contemporary situation.

You're right to point to the important shift towards perspectives derived from anthropology as a way of understanding culture as a way of life. But that argument doesn't have any specific or particular relation to the British case. It would apply, I think, to the study of culture in all societies. What is most specific to the development to cultural studies in

Britain, in particular, relates to the moment of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the moment of the 'Popular Culture' course which ran at the Open University from 1982 to 1987. That was a moment when several key factors combined, which led to the stress on the politics of popular culture. Let me explain.

At that point in the early 1980s, Mrs Thatcher had just been elected and Stuart Hall and others argued that her victory was founded on a form of populism (rather like Ernesto Laclau argues in the case of the success of the Peronist political movement in Argentina). Hall rightly argued that Mrs Thatcher's victory could only be understood – and effectively opposed – on the ground of culture. His point was that she had successfully articulated forms of 'authoritarian populism' which genuinely resonated with the feelings and aspirations of the dissatisfied white working class of Britain. The argument was that the core explanation for the overwhelming working-class electoral vote for her was their support for her vision of the return to what she called 'traditional Victorian values'. They supported her rejection of the post-war liberal progressivism of the 1960s and 1970s. Hall's argument was that, if that was so, then the understanding of the cultural dimension of politics, especially in the form of popular culture, becomes critical. At the same time, a variety of dissident groups in Britain – women, gays, black people, disabled people, etc. – were also insisting there were cultural dimensions to politics. They insisted that their oppression often took cultural forms, for instance, negative stereotypes of them in jokes or in popular entertainment, and thus, they argued, the transformation of these forms of popular culture was an important dimension of political struggle. That was all part of the 'turn to Gramsci' and that was the reason for the corresponding stress on the cultural dimension of politics, in which context the analysis of the dynamics of popular culture was then seen as the key task.

The further point here is that you have to understand that this was an argument which was made in the face of a rather hard-line, leftist, Marxism, which said that culture was not really important at all, and attributed everything to economic factors. However, that analysis completely misses out the extent to which Mrs Thatcher's political success worked precisely by transforming British culture – and by transforming what were understood to be British values. She had to transform those things, in order to gain the popular support to go on and win the later political and economic fights that she got into – e.g. with the miners when they went on strike for a whole year. So her *first* political victory was at the level of culture: in shifting values and reasserting the sense of individualism, individual achievement, individual ambition and individual responsibility in all spheres of life. Having won that cultural battle, she was then in a position to win the political and economic battles. That was, in a sense, a cultural revolution in Britain: she achieved a revolution in the culture of everyday life and shifted everybody's assumptions a long way to the Right.

The long-run significance of this can perhaps be seen now, after the end of the period of the 'New Labour' government. Despite the claim that New Labour had a different (and supposedly radical) approach to politics, in a very significant sense what the New Labour government did was simply to live out its life under the hegemony of the terms of reference established by Mrs Thatcher. I think you could very reasonably say – as many people have done – that Tony Blair represented Mrs Thatcher's 'true heir', because the cultural battles that she won – about individualized responsibility, and about the free market – established the hegemony of a set of ideas which shifted the whole political terrain, and which New Labour did little to question, for fear of losing 'middle ground' electoral support. Politics in the UK today is still being fought out inside the terms of reference established by the cultural victories which Mrs Thatcher achieved. Now the new Coalition government is pursuing that Thatcherite agenda even more radically than New Labour ever did, in its plans to totally dismantle the remnants of the welfare state set up as part of the post-Second World War settlement in the late 1940s and thus establish a new 'common sense' in which the market is taken as the hegemonic form for the modelling of all areas of social life.

HJ: There is a popular view that your reputation in the area of cultural studies was established by your television audience researches, which are mainly shown in your two books *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (1980) and *Family Television* (1986). From your empirical work, what theoretically, in brief, have you developed or reinforced? I should say sorry if you would think I am over-concerned with the theory *per se*, which may be contradictory to the tradition of British cultural studies.

DM: It's quite true that my own reputation within cultural studies was largely founded on the audience studies that I did in the 1970s and 1980s, published as *The 'Nationwide' Audience* and *Family Television.* However, I was never, in fact, particularly interested in either television or audiences themselves, as objects of study. What I was interested in was the question of cultural power. The choice to make an empirical study of television audiences was simply a way to 'operationalize' a study of the extent (and limits) of ideological or cultural hegemony, as manifested in the forms of media consumption. As for your further question, concerning what, theoretically, my empirical work has achieved, my answer would be that it has produced a far better model of the operation of media power than would have been made possible by continuing to make abstract speculations about media effects of the sort offered by such scholars as Adorno and Horkheimer in the early period, by McLuhan in the 1960s, or by Baudrillard in the postmodern version. In my view, despite the evident theoretical sophistication of much of this work, it nonetheless still operates with what is, in the end, a very simplistic motion of media effects. Even the latest version of 'new media' theory is still flawed by the simplistic assumption, carried over from Adorno and Horkheimer, that the media (or in this case, the 'new'

technologies) have automatic and unavoidable 'effects' on people. Apart from anything else, that is inadequate because it is, ultimately, a technologically determinist argument. I have developed this line of critique of the severe limitations of so-called 'new media theory' most fully in the section of my last book (Morley, 2007) titled 'Rhetorics of the Technological Sublime' in relation to the problems posed by the foreshortened a-historical perspective of these theories and their oversimplification of the crude binary divide which they draw between the 'old' world of the analogue media, with their audiences of supposedly passive 'couch potatoes', and the marvels of the new digital era, in which it is assumed that 'we' are all more significantly active.

Clearly, my own inclination here would be to go back again to Williams' argument in *Television, Technology and Cultural Form* (2003 [1974]), which very carefully shows that technologies do *not* have effects built into them, because it's always a question of how particular technologies come to be institutionalized in particular ways. There are many social and cultural forces which act to determine that. As my own work has shown, along with that of people such as the late Roger Silverstone, new technologies don't simply have effects on people, just as media don't have direct effects on their audiences. The question is how particular people, in particular contexts, perceive the relevance (or irrelevance) of specific media technologies for their lives, and how they then choose to use those technologies – or ignore them, or indeed 'bend' them in some way, to a purpose for which they were not intended.

In either case, the effects are not directly produced. If my work has been about one thing it has been about how to develop a more satisfactory model of the power of the media. I'm not in the business of *denying* the power of the media, or denying that particular technologies allow new things to happen. My point is to better understand *how* that power operates, in conjunction with the fact that people *do* make choices, and do make their own interpretations of material provided to them by the media, whether we are talking about the mass media of broadcasting or the micro-mobile media of today's world.

One of the interesting points you raise in your questions is the status of 'Theory', and its position within the tradition of British cultural studies. I think it is a very interesting question and it does concern me deeply. It's very common in contemporary debates, especially among people whose background is in sociology or philosophy, rather than in cultural studies, for people to make a claim for high status by presenting themselves as 'Theorists'. However, that is an approach which, in terms of the role of theory in the tradition of cultural studies defined by Stuart Hall, can only appear as extremely naïve. Hall's version of cultural studies is not at all resistant to theory as such. But that tradition, within which I'm situated, is one in which we *use* theory in order to theorize some particular, empirically specific conjuncture or situation, *not* for the purpose of generalized and abstracted speculation. If you look at Hall's 'Marx's Notes on Method:

A "Reading" of the "1857 Introduction"' (1974), the point is made very clearly there. For Hall, theory is not valued in itself, but in terms of its usefulness in *theorizing* particular conjunctures. The problematic issue about philosophical-style 'Theory in the Abstract' concerns the high intellectual price which must be paid for any moment of abstraction. Of course, theoretical abstraction is a powerful, and often necessary, intellectual tool, as it allows you to condense what would otherwise be a mountain of potentially confusing data, in order to see the underlying patterns. But, just like a power-saw, it is also a potentially dangerous tool, which must be used very carefully if it is not to do more harm than good. Of course, any abstraction or categorization is, of its nature, reductive. The question is always whether *this* particular formal abstraction is worthwhile, in a specific case. Each time you abstract, you have to ask yourself whether the benefit you will get, in so far as the abstraction contributes to your ability to make some ordered analysis of cultural patterns, is sufficient to make up for the fact that, in making that abstraction, you'll be losing track of some part of the particularity of the situation you are trying to analyse.

Coming, as I have said, from a tradition which emphasizes specificity in empirical investigations, I am unsympathetic to what the French philosopher Michel Serres (whose approach closely parallels that of Hall) calls lazy forms of 'one size fits all' theory. As Serres says, it is lamentably easy to use that kind of theory to reduce all phenomena to one ultimate set of 'truths' (whether those of Marxist economics, Semiotics, Freudian psychoanalysis or Foucauldian discourse theory). However, as he observes, a single theoretical 'pass key' will never suffice to open all doors – rather, as he insists, each time you want to 'unlock' a specific problem, you must forge the specific theoretical key which will be adequate to the problem in hand (Serres and Latour, 1995).

I'm interested in 'grounded' forms of theory. So, for example, if we take the case of TV as a medium, I would not want to say that television is (essentially) a thing which has some particular set of facets – or that it is in the '*essence*' of the medium, philosophically understood, that it should *always* have these effects. Rather than that very deterministic and mechanical mode of analysis, I'm interested in understanding how things work in particular circumstances or contexts, when media technologies are actually used by different people.

Of course, we must find a way to see the deep-seated (and sometimes hidden) patterns in our data, and it is no good disavowing all generalizations and ending up in a post-structuralist morass of just telling a million individual stories of infinite difference. But we must, nonetheless, use those generalizations very cautiously and be attentive to the extent to which, every time we make a generalization, we pay a price, in the loss of contextual specificity. The question is one of always keeping one's eyes on the 'price ticket' – making sure that what you lose in the use of that theoretical abstraction is outweighed by the gains in analytical power that it enables.

HJ: When you were developing your theory of active audiences, did you have in mind German reception-theory such as the works of the Konstanz School, say, Hans Herbert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser? Or, you might have had some other theoretical resources available? It looks as if British cultural studies concurs basically with reception-theory in assuming that audiences are never passive receivers of media messages, or that, furthermore, the reception or consumption of television messages can be elevated as a part of the whole television production.

DM: Your question puts me in mind of the story that Janice Radway tells in the introduction to the British edition of her book *Reading the Romance* (1987 [1984]), which was published here some years after its initial publication in America. There, Radway explains that, when she subsequently discovered British cultural studies work (including my own work on television audiences) she was astounded to discover how closely it 'fitted' with the perspective that she, independently, had been developing in her ethnographic work on women readers of romance fiction.

The situation was rather parallel, I think, in terms of my own relation to the German theories to which you refer. In fact, I only came across the work of Jauss and Iser at some point in the early 1980s, well after my work on the *'Nationwide' Audience* had been done. What was interesting, of course, was that, rather like Radway, I then had the experience of coming across a body of fascinating theoretical work which was very close to what I had been doing, even though it wasn't directly influential in the construction of my own perspective. This is perhaps a general point about the fact that, if something is a good idea, it is probably going to be worked out by more than one person, in more than one place, often simultaneously! So Jauss and Iser and I end up not exactly in the same place but on relatively close theoretical paths, although we got there from different routes, and by means of different theoretical resources.

In terms of my own theoretical resources, the key ones were sociolinguistics and cultural anthropology. I believe I was the first person to use the now well-worn term 'ethnography' in relation to media audiences, in a paper that I wrote in 1972: 'Reconceptualising the Media Audience: Towards an Ethnography of Audiences' (1974). Where did I get that from? From the work of people like Dell Hymes and Clifford Geertz in cultural anthropology. As for the resources used to analyse the interpretations which people made of television programmes (which was the key main in the *'Nationwide' Audience* study), the key elements came from debates in the sociology of education about the role of linguistic codes in determining children's educational success or failure – which was a theory which seemed to me to also be applicable to how the availability of different cultural resources might play some part in determining patterns of decoding TV. At that time, in Britain in the early 1970s, the key debate was between Basil Bernstein and his critic Harold Rosen. The issue at stake was to do with the role of class structure in the determination of language abilities

and language uses. Bernstein had a rather deterministic approach, which was very important in identifying differences between working-class language and middle-class language, much of which has very close parallels with the work of Pierre Bourdieu in France about the social distribution of cultural capital and cultural competences.

Conversely, while Rosen appreciated the power of those analyses, he was very concerned that they were being conducted in too essentialist a way. Rosen was aware that while class (or gender, or racial origin, or the membership of any kind of social category) is very likely to have some effect on the forms of cultural capital to which someone in a given social position has access, this is not an *automatic* process. He was also concerned with the way in which people 'inhabit' their membership of any particular collectivity. In a certain sense, already in the 1970s Rosen was making exactly the kind of argument which someone like Judith Butler makes now, 30 years later. Just as Butler says that we are not all living in what she calls the 'prison house of gender' (because there are different ways of inhabiting the category of masculinity or femininity), Rosen is making the same point about class: we are not just 'prisoners' of class – because there are different ways of inhabiting middle-class or working-class identities. The main problem with Bernstein's model is that it just avoided this issue entirely in its sociological determinism, assuming that the effects of class position were more or less automatic. This is a criticism which some of us would say also applies to the work of Bourdieu – which has much in common with that of Bernstein. Thus, one could make an analogy and say that if Bernstein was the English version of Bourdieu, his critic, Rosen, was the equivalent of Michel de Certeau, one of Bourdieu's most important critics in France.

So, to go back to where I started in my answer to this question, my main theoretical resources came from cultural anthropology, in terms of providing a model for a 'close reading' of particular actions as understood in context. They also came from sociolinguistics – and especially from Vološinov's insistence on the 'multi-accentuality' of the sign, his insistence (in contradiction of Saussure) that there is no totally shared language system (Saussure's '*langue*') in a given society, and that one has to be sensitive to the conflicts that are fought out in and through language and culture.

HJ: If you hold that 'individual readings will be framed by shared cultural formations and practices preexistent to the individual' (Morley, 1980: 15), though in a complex and subtle way, how could you demarcate your theory of active, therefore resistant audiences from the Frankfurt School's 'non-resistant' conception of the masses that are passively injected with a prevailing ideology? When the masses begin to decode the televisional texts, they might have been 'pre-mass-ed' by some other factors, social or ideological, which you admit as pre-existent, other than by the modern communications, television included – by ideology or, precisely, being part of ideological totality or ideological apparatus: a role, whatever it may be, which you

seem to hesitate to recognize. To be clear, my inference here is that so long as you assert that individual interpretations are socially, at least partially, determined, you would have already accepted that the cultural industry as a social or ideological force or apparatus does play a role in making the masses. This argument may be supported by the text's role to which you still attach importance: interpretations are not 'arbitrary' but 'subject to constraints contained within the text itself' (Morley, 1980: 148–9).

DM: Essentially, in *The 'Nationwide' Audience* I was trying to offer what I think is a better way of understanding media power than is offered by the Frankfurt School's simplistic approach to audiences – as passive 'dupes' – which was predominant at that time. I'm quite happy to accept that Adorno and Horkheimer make sophisticated *general* arguments about the way in which the culture industry shapes consciousness. In criticizing their model of the *automatic* 'effects' of the media on the masses, I'm not trying to replace it by a theory which says that all audiences are completely 'active' and are making just any interpretation they want out of the media materials they come across. In that respect, my perspective is quite different from that of scholars such as John Fiske in what has come to be called the 'active audiences' tradition. Contrary to them, I'm not trying to deny issues of media power. Moreover, despite my criticisms of Bourdieu and Bernstein's overly deterministic model of class, I'm also very interested in the way in which the ability of a person to re-interpret or re-use the media to which they have access is, in fact, *to some extent* determined by their social position. That's because their social position will limit their access to particular types of cultural codes and cultural capital. However, I'm *not* advocating some model of 'free-floating' individuals who are just able to do whatever they like with what the media offers to them.

   Here I would also distinguish my own position from that of people like Ulrich Beck: when Beck says that in today's 'individualized' world, class is no more than a 'zombie' category of little use in analysing social life, I think he is quite wrong. Class continues to exercise profound effects on people's lives – especially in an era where, in the UK at least, rates of inter-generational mobility are declining: so that class position at birth is now an even *better* predictor of an individual's probable life course than it was 30 years ago. Of course, class or any other mode of social categorization (such as gender or ethnicity) can be used in an overly deterministic – and thus, 'zombie-like' – way, but that is a matter of how exactly you use the categories in your analysis, not whether or not the categories are intrinsically useful or not.

   I'm also quite prepared to accept that the socio-cultural 'identities' which I use in *The 'Nationwide' Audience* analysis as *explanations* of how this or that person interprets a particular programme are themselves socially and culturally constructed. In English, we have this expression, which is a kind of rhetorical figure, or joke, in which one says: 'Which came first, the chicken or the egg?' In one way it is just a silly joke.

But, at another level, it expresses a rather profound philosophical dilemma. Of course, in a sense, it doesn't matter which came first. What you have to understand is what their relationship is. The same goes for the question of the role of the culture industry in the construction of consciousness and in the provision of the materials out of which people construct their identities, through the decoding of TV programmes, among other things. The subsequent issue is how you can then look at those identities themselves as partly explaining why this person, in this particular position, will tend to be affected (or not affected) by this particular media, or how they will tend to interpret some particular media programme. One has to understand that as a dialectical process between determination and activity: to go back to the original, as Marx says, men and women make their history, but not in conditions of their own choice.

In the media field, what we are looking at is the way in which social positions go some way to determining the cultural resources available to you, the cultural choices you can make – out of which you construct your identity. Now that's not to say that you construct your identity on a '*tabula rasa*' in a world of completely free choices – that you could decide to just be anybody, or do anything at random, or interpret the media just any way you like – you couldn't. We all have only a certain limited repertoire of possibilities available to us, and yet nonetheless, within that circumscribed repertoire there are still choices to be made, and those choices are significant. One can't explain the determination as total or automatic – to take that view is just to wipe out the complexity of the dialectic which is at the heart of the process.

HJ: Adapting from Frank Parkin, Stuart Hall (1973) argues that there may be three 'hypothetical' positions from which a media message is decoded by audiences: the dominant-hegemonic, the negotiated, and the oppositional, among which the latter two, compared with the first, that rarely happens in practice, are stressed for their frequency. It can be seen that there is a point at which your theory of the active audience encounters this argument: the resistance implicit in all interpretations of media texts. Here my concern is with the questions of what makes a reading active or resistant and why the cultural industry is not able to knead all the receivers simply into the masses.

DM: I agree with the proposition, implicit in your question, that in a sense, *all* readings are active. To make any sense at all of a TV message you first have to interpret the dots and noise on the screen as representing images of people, or voices and so on, and you've got to read the rules of perspective, through which you can reconstruct the image of a three-dimensional world from a two-dimensional screen. Thus, activity is always present in the interpretation of media messages. As for when an interpretation is resistant, that is quite a difficult question. You could argue, for instance, that in *The 'Nationwide' Audience*, the reaction of the young black students who dismiss '*Nationwide*' as irrelevant to them, and who refuse, in a sense, to

make any decoding of it at all, is far more radical a move than that of the left-wing trade unionists in the study, who produce a classically oppositional reading of the '*Nationwide*' text, but who do so from *within* a framework in which they recognize the programme as relevant to them. While accepting some of the political terms in play, they make a critical counter-argument to them, and that is a form of opposition, certainly. But you could argue that the reaction of those who dismiss the whole genre of that kind of politics as irrelevant to them (as the young black students do) is, in another sense, a much *more* radical form of negativity, and I don't think that Parkin's model is able to deal with that question. That model (and the way Hall initially takes it up) rather assumes that consciously politicized opposition is the most active, and most radical, and in that sense, the most important form of response to the media. I'm not sure that it is the case and that's why, as my work developed, I begin to 'operationalize' the model in a slightly different way, so as to take account of the ways in which all readings are active (whether the dominant, negotiated or oppositional modes of decoding), but also to take account of the fact that the forms of activity are themselves various, in ways which Parkin's model is not really capable of dealing with.

HJ: Social-contextually, why did the Frankfurt School choose a passive model of media consumers while British cultural studies chose an active one? To put it differently, what are the social conditions that underlie this shift of media studies, if there are any that work? In connection with this, textually, I doubt that mass culture and popular culture are referred by them to the same media texts and/or in the same way, even though they might overlap. I wonder if categorically the masses is more closely associated with the producers of the cultural industry while the popular more with consumers of the products. If it is true, can we argue that this shift reflects a social transformation from production society to consumer society, as Jean Baudrillard has distinguished them, and that your audience theory is rooted in such a consumer society in which people have more choices, in the face of a plethora of commodities?

DM: I think I'd put it rather differently! I'm not sure that you can understand the Frankfurt School's model of media power without thinking quite specifically of the contexts of Weimar and Nazi Germany in the 1930s, when those theories were being developed. There you have the context of the emergence of powerful new media – in that case, radio and cinema – and new forms of political rhetoric, operating in a relation to a population which, in its mobility from rural to urban areas, was becoming '*anomic*' and thus more vulnerable to persuasion and propaganda. Those circumstances demand attention and sensitivity to questions of media power and manipulation. That is why Adorno and Horkheimer were interested in the particular questions that they focus on. British cultural studies certainly arises in very different circumstances, but I'm not sure that I would interpret that in the way that you seem to imply, in your question.

As I understand your argument, you are suggesting that we face a move from a 'producer society' to a 'consumer society', that the concept of 'the masses' (as mobilized in the Frankfurt School's work) is a characteristic of what you call a producer society – and that popular culture is then, conversely, associated with the consumer society. From that premise, if I understand you rightly, you see 'active audience theory' as being to do with the extent to which, in this thing called the 'consumer society', people have more choices.

I think that's a problematic form of historical periodization and one which is characteristic of a certain type of sociological approach – many social theorists love inventing new periodizations! For example, nowadays many are people talking about Deleuze and something called '*The* control society', without a clear definition of what that is or when (and where) it started! Then people speak of '*The* consumer society': but that has various definitions. You could talk about the consumer society of post-war Europe in the 1950s, or you could talk about today's emerging consumer society in China, which seems to me to operate a in very different kind of way. Those would, minimally, have to be understood as rather different sub-types of the overall concept: and once you recognize that, it follows that you cannot just assume that the same tendencies will apply in the same ways in these different contexts.

Rather than thinking in terms of a total shift in historical periods, from producer to consumer society, as you suggest (a shift in which power is understood to have moved from the producers to the consumers), my own perspective would be to say that in *both* situations, there always have been – and still are – *both* aspects of that question. That is to say, in what you would refer to as the 'producer society' of the era of mass culture, there were still choices to be made. People still did choose between this or that aspect of mass culture and, indeed, reacted to it, or interpreted it, in different ways – so they were still active, even then. And conversely, even now, in this so-called consumer society, where people do get to make more choices, we mustn't confuse choice with empowerment in any simple sense, nor with a loss of producer power. I might have a larger number of channels from which to choose what to watch on my television set these days, but it's still a menu set by someone else, within which I have to choose.

To put it another way, I'm more interested in the continuities and crossovers between these so-called different 'periods' or different 'types' of society than I am in just accepting such clear binary divisions unproblematically. In that respect I'm influenced by Derrida's insistence on deconstructing and destabilizing those kind of binaries – and by his insistence on the need to pay attention to the ambivalences which cut across the kind of binary divisions of which sociologists, in particular, are rather too fond of for my liking!

HJ: Did the postmodernism, for instance, of Fredric Jameson, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard (in any other aspects,

rather than his social periodization which you seemed to suspect) help to shape your television studies, and in the first place, of course, your audience studies? If so, in what ways did it work? You know, postmodern declarations such as the death of the author, or of subjectivity, were quite provocative, and they tend to emphasize the role of readers in the process of reception.

DM: Let me take those authors in stages. Barthes was certainly influential for me, at an early stage, in setting up the kind of semiological model with which I was working. But I rapidly moved towards Vološinov's critique of that rather rigid form of semiology. (Here one must also note that, later in his career, Barthes himself became sceptical of his early dream of a 'scientific semiology'!) So Barthes was influential, but perhaps Umberto Eco more so, especially in his essay 'Does the Audience Have Bad Effects on Television?' (1995 [1994]). But Vološinov was the key resource, in producing an analysis that was attentive to the mobility of signs; to the conflict between signs; to what he calls the multi-accentuality of signs; and to the way in which different people will use the same sign or word or image for very different purposes.

As for postmodernism, the story is rather different. The simple fact is that postmodernism came much later – Baudrillard, Jameson and Foucault only came to have influence in cultural studies circles in the UK long after I produced the *'Nationwide'* and *Family Television* studies. Again, as far as these periodizations go, just as I'm not much enamoured of the notion of mass society, or consumer society, or production society, or control society, likewise 'postmodernity' seems to me a rather weakly defined category. The notion that ours simply 'is' a postmodernism era, seems problematic to me, unless I know when it began, which in turn all depends on which definition of modernity or modernism you are using. If there is such a thing as a postmodern era, it's hard to imagine that it started on the same day and exists in the same form in Tokyo, Los Angeles or in some village in rural Uganda.

Overall, I'm more interested in the notion of how differential temporalities often coexist in any one historical moment. In this respect I'm influenced by historians of the Annales School, such as Fernand Braudel, and his ideas of differential historical time or, at a simpler level, Raymond Williams' notion of the coexistence of 'emergent' and 'residual' dimensions in a culture, alongside whatever is 'dominant' at that particular time. In that context, one interesting issue, it seems to me, is to do with the different sequences in which particular theorists are read in different cultural contexts. What I have in mind here is how all of this might possibly seem to you, and to a Chinese audience, reading about these things in the 21st century, 25 years or so after I was principally involved in doing this kind of work on TV audiences, in a quite different context.

Let me put that point another way. In a public debate at a conference, I was once asked what the difference was between British cultural studies and American cultural studies, and I had to come up with an instant answer! In that setting, my answer was that it was the difference between

Foucault read through Gramsci, and Gramsci read through Foucault. The point is that, in Britain, people had been reading Gramsci in cultural studies, and then discovered Foucault, and began to rethink Gramsci a little bit, in terms of what difference Foucault's intervention made to that perspective. Conversely, in America, a lot of people in cultural studies came across Foucault first and only came to Gramsci subsequently, at the moment when British cultural studies 'imported' Gramsci into the USA. So what you get in much American cultural studies is a framework that is fundamentally Foucauldian, but which then works in a little bit of Gramsci. My point is that this difference of sequence, in terms of theoretical influences, has considerable significance. One has to pay attention to the modes of cultural transmission, and be sensitive to the complex routes through which particular theories come to dominance in different circumstances. One mustn't presume that which is, or was, useful or significant at one moment in a particular place will work in the same way or have the same significance in a different set of circumstances.

Let me give you another example. I once did some work with the late Italian semiologist Mauro Wolf, who died a few years ago. Before his death, he was working on a book in which he was going to translate George Gerbner's works on 'cultivation analysis' into Italian, in order to develop a model of the long-term effects of the Italian media. What was interesting about this was the potential significance of Gerbner's work in Italy at that particular moment in the very early 1990s. As far as people in the British or American cultural studies tradition were concerned, by then, Gerbner's work seemed rather old fashioned – and very much 'displaced' by the work in Italian semiotics of people like Eco. However, Wolf could see that if you *started* from semiological premises, as Italian media scholars naturally did given the strength of that tradition's development in Italy, then importing Gerbner into the debate at *that* point could prove very useful. I'm making an elementary point about the way in which the significance of any particular theory or theorist may vary immensely according to its context in different times and different places, and according to the very different sequences in which intellectual life develops in particular countries.

As for the question of the 'death of the author', and the 'birth of the reader', again, rather like what I said in relation to your counter-position of 'producer society' and 'consumer society' (and in relation to any notion that should be understood to just move directly from the one to the other), I don't think that you have to 'kill' the author in order to give birth to the reader! I think we still have to think about *both* authors and readers. I quite agree with the polemical thrust of Barthes' original proposition, that we have to find a way to allow more space to the reader than was allowed by classical literary theory. But I don't believe that, in order to do that, we need to get rid of the idea of authorship, not least because texts do still have authors, even if those authors are now sometimes collective agents (e.g. film crews) rather than solitary individuals.

To give you a different example, there's a wonderful moment where, in his debate with John Searle, Derrida (an author who is often assumed to oppose any idea of fixed textual meaning) claims his authority over his own texts very strongly. Thus, there's a moment in which he criticizes John Searle for having 'misread' one of his texts. And Derrida says: 'As the author, I claim the authority to tell Searle what I meant.' So there you have Derrida, the *doyen* of deconstructionism, claiming authority by virtue of authorship. That perhaps indicates that authors are not yet quite dead, and indeed, they don't *need* to be dead in order for readers to breathe.

HJ: Don't you think the ways in which television programmes are structured, or rather, de-structured, are postmodern-styled? You know, in his article 'Cleverness is All', which you quoted to deal with the topic of post-modernism, M. Ignatieff finds that in television programmes narrative is replaced by flow, connection by disconnection and sequence by randomness (quoted in Morley, 1996: 61). Besides, as you noticed, Dick Hebdige also points to the characteristics of such texts: 'Popular culture offers a rich iconography, a set of symbols, objects and artifacts, which can be assembled and reassembled by different groups in a literally limitless number of combinations' (Hebdige, 1979: 104). My further question, then, is whether this new kind of text, appearing first and foremost in television programmes, was a driving force, among others, that helped to open your horizon of the active audience.

DM: No, my analysis was developed in the mid 1970s, long before this notion of postmodern 'flow', disconnection, or randomization really had much significance in the world of the media. The media I was analysing, both in the '*Nationwide*' project and in the *Family Television* project, were fairly conventional forms of narrative, and were characterized neither by disconnection or randomness. But, beyond that point, I have some conceptual problems with the question. First, I'm not convinced by the generalization that television (or 'the media') are 'nowadays' more disconnected and random than they were at some earlier moment. I'm not sure how powerful that proposition is. It may be true at a high level of abstraction, but there really isn't very much which is true about 'Television in General'. So, from my point of view, as I explained earlier, it's difficult to contrast the 'television of today' with the 'television of yesterday' unless you fill in at least some of the gaps and say *which* television, *where*? Otherwise, the generalization is so large as to hide rather more than it reveals. Indeed, one might well argue that there has always been much more variation *within* television at any given moment than there is between the television of one era and the television of another.

Second, I don't think that audience activity depends on disconnection; people can be very active with very closed texts. Umberto Eco is very interesting about the contradictions that one can see at play, in that situation, in relation to the manipulation of 'closed' texts. I also think there is an interesting question to do with historical development. In the 1970s, you get a

very important moment when structuralist analysts criticize the traditional forms of content analysis, insisting that you cannot understand a television programme by simply counting the disaggregated bits, in the way that traditional content analysis does. Their argument is that a programme is a structured whole, and so you can only understand the meaning of one bit of content *in relation to* the other bits with which they are combined. That analysis, first developed in film theory was then largely taken over from film to television studies, so then many scholars stopped doing the traditional kinds of content analysis of television, because they understood that they needed to look holistically at the whole structure of a programme.

But then a further difficulty came with the ethnographic evidence that gradually accumulated, showing that's *not* how people watch television, especially once you have conveniences such as the automatic control device – with which a person can change channels without moving, by simply flicking a button. What you begin to get then is a new mode of viewing, in which people don't necessarily sit down and watch *whole* TV programmes. In fact, most people, most of the time, only consume *bits* of different television programmes – they might go out to do something else in the middle, they might change programmes and watch something else and then come back later to the one they started with. At that point, the structuralist critique of content analysis loses its force. One has to recognize that, in so far as viewing modes are increasingly fragmented, it might be the case that the kind of 'cumulative effects' of media patterns of images and statements, of the type researched by Gerbner, might have more relevance than the structuralist critics of the 1970s have supposed, precisely because that critique was premised on the audience displaying a mode of focused attention on the complete, single text. That premise may be feasible if your object of study is film, shown in special places called cinemas – but it is not feasible when applied to the study, for instance, of domestic television, where the circumstances generally dictate a rather different, more distracted, mode of consumption. However, one still has to allow for certain exceptions. There are moments, even in contemporary conditions of domestic consumption, in which someone might well sit down and watch a whole text – e.g. of their 'favourite' programme. Conversely, there may be occasions in which someone goes to the cinema and, for whatever reason, doesn't concentrate on the film all the way through. You can't *presume* a one to one relationship between a particular architecture of display and a particular mode of consumption. Nor can you presume that there is only one mode of consumption for one particular medium. One can realistically, and usefully, only research the identifiable patterns of consumption of different media in different contexts, and one must always be sensitive to variations of the sorts I have indicated.

HJ: In the field of popular culture studies, how has British cultural studies responded to French post-structuralism or, broadly, to postmodernism? Would you please give me an overview of their interactions or contestations

in interpreting popular culture? It seems to me that British cultural studies has never given up its modernist perspective by which popular culture is not depthless, superficial and then meaningless as Fredric Jameson claims, but a site of ideological struggles, negotiations, concessions, compromises, or in short, of exactly that meaningfulness.

DM: My own position is that, interesting and stimulating as both Jameson and Baudrillard can be, there is something fundamentally elitist about the contempt in which they both hold popular culture and, thus, about the contempt in which they implicitly also hold the majority of the people who are engaged with popular culture. To dismiss this whole field as depthless, superficial and meaningless, as they do, seems to me an act of the most stunning arrogance and that is definitely not a direction which I'd want to follow. I notice that, in a previous question, you referred approvingly to the work of Hebdige. I think that, by contrast to people like Jameson and Baudrillard, he is an elegant example of someone who would never make the mistake of dismissing popular culture as either depthless, superficial or meaningless. Rather like Hebdige, my concern is to understand the forms and modalities of popular culture, but, in doing so, I take very seriously the meanings at stake for its participants. To go back to one of my answers to an earlier question, I think it would be impossible to understand the rise of Thatcherism in Britain without understanding how that battle was fought out on the field of popular culture. I don't think that was in the slightest bit 'meaningless'. I do also think there was a difference between what one could see 'on the surface' and the hidden significances that one could read, at a deeper level, from the visible, 'symptomatic' events. Some of the things that might have *seemed* rather superficial, in fact, turned out to be of huge cultural, economic and political significance, and it was only by studying these seemingly trivial shifts in popular culture very carefully that it was possible to establish what was happening in British culture and politics in that period. The same would follow now: one needs to analyse the contemporary developments of popular culture with the same degree of seriousness – a theoretical point which goes back, beyond Stuart Hall, to Richard Hoggart's early work on popular culture in the UK in the 1950s.

HJ: There is a view which says that the good days of British cultural studies are now long past. It might be true to the extent that Stuart Hall has been retired for years and the CCCS has been closed, and that, what is more critical, there have been few new themes and core figures emerging that generate as much interest as broadly as before. However, from another point of view, after these changes it is time for us to redefine, with some critical reflections, British cultural studies or cultural studies. There are many other centres for cultural studies both in and outside Britain, that is, cultural studies becomes increasingly international. Concerning the new context, I am quite interested in questions such as how British cultural studies is going on in Britain, in what way you and your colleagues continue British cultural studies, how we can promote cultural studies in a global

sense, and last, back to our main topic in this interview, how you think about popular culture that crosses boundaries: popular culture is always not only domestically but also globally popular.

DM: Clearly, this is a very difficult and important issue. The story of the influence, internationally, of British cultural studies, is perhaps best understood as a kind of 'export industry' through which a particular set of perspectives, initially developed in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, addressing the specific problems of British society, were gradually exported to the English-speaking territories of the previous British empire, most notably Australia, Canada and then, at a later point, to America. Manifestly, British cultural studies was designed to analyse the situation of a particular country at a particular time. Of course, there are certain theoretical and analytical positions built into it which can be abstracted and transported to different circumstances, allowing for the relevant variations and distinctions that need to be made. However, the idea that British cultural studies can usefully be exported as a kind of 'ready-made' template, according to which the whole world can be understood, is clearly nonsensical: that would just be another form of cultural imperialism, this time in the intellectual sphere. Cultural studies, wherever it is conducted, has to construct modes of analysis which are relevant to its own conditions of production in a particular place, at a particular time.

For instance, it may well be that someone trying to develop a cultural studies perspective in China now, as I understand you are doing, can hope to learn certain things from the history of the development of cultural studies in Britain, or elsewhere. But you have to approach those previous intellectual traditions, located elsewhere, with a strong element of critical intelligence, and you have to think carefully about in what ways, given the many differences between British and Chinese society, you would need to transpose the modes of analysis developed in Britain in order for them to be of any use at all in China. So again, that takes us back to the contextual specificity of cultural studies.

One also has to be attentive to the way in which the world around us has changed significantly since the 1970s when my own audience work was actually conducted. The model of cultural studies that we developed in Britain then was one which was premised on the notion of a *national* society. We were primarily concerned with class, race and gender differences within Britain, and with the British media. Certainly, those still remain very important problems but nowadays, communications is simply not national in the way that it was in the 1970s. We now have transnational broadcast systems, and satellite systems of communication, which mean that messages are mobile, all over the place. Cultures are no longer simply national. That is the force of Appadurai's argument about 'difference and disjuncture' (1996: 27ff.) in the global economy, when he talks about how the 'mediascapes' of the contemporary world now exceed national boundaries. He also talks there about how the 'ethnoscapes' of our contemporary

situation also now transcend national boundaries, in so far as we live in a situation in which not only are messages mobile across boundaries, but so too are audiences. In a world of increased migrancy, we are now in a situation, as he says, where 'moving messages meet deterritorialized viewers' (1996: 4).

Now, clearly, that is a very different situation from the one that we faced in Birmingham in 1972, when I began my studies of audiences – and we have to allow for those differences in any contemporary analysis that we want to make. At the same time, to go back to what I said before about my anxiety about clearly 'binarized' divisions and periodizations, I don't want to suggest that the age of the nation-state or 'the national era' is completely over – or that we now all live in some 'transnational' period, in which we are all equally mobile and all attending to messages which come to us from far away. That's simply not the case. Some people, in some places, are much more transnational than others, and many still effectively live out their lives within national – and even more local – boundaries. That was the problem that I explored in my book *Home Territories* (2000), which was focused on questions of mobility and the media, but was also insistent on continuing to pay attention to the ways in which boundaries of a local, regional or national kind, are still, in many ways, enforced today. Indeed, it would seem to me that in China, in particular, the nation-state is not only 'still alive' but is both thriving and powerful, if in different ways than within the nations of Europe.

In ending, let me say again that we clearly cannot take any mode of analysis, be it British cultural studies or anything else, and imagine that it will automatically help us understand the situation in another culture at a different time, without making all manner of cultural translations and transpositions. However, on the other hand, we have no need to imagine that we live in some totally 'new' world, where all previous theories are now redundant. As people like Carolyn Marvin (1990 [1988]) have shown us, *all* technologies, all media, were new in their own time: the telegraph, the cinema, the radio, the television, the video game, the computer (cf. Morley, 2007: 243). There is always a moral panic about the latest 'new' medium and its supposed 'effects', and many of the problems we face today have clear historical precedents which we need to consider. I think that we have to develop a much more serious historical and comparative set of perspectives within cultural studies. And I hope that you and your colleagues in China will find some parts of what I have to say in this interview of use to you in your project of trying to do that! Thank you.

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