

## ***Audiences and Reception Theory***

***By Julie Martin***

Stuart Hall's "Encoding-Decoding" model of communication essentially states that meaning is encoded by the sender and decoded by the receiver and that these encoded meanings may be decoded to mean something else. That is to mean, the senders encode meaning in their messages according to their ideals and views and the messages are decoded by the receivers according to their own ideals and views, which may lead to miscommunication or to the receiver understanding something very different from what the sender intended. (Hall 1993, 91)

Hall says that there are three different positions audiences (receivers) take in order to decode the meanings within cultural texts, particularly televisual discourses. They are the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position and the oppositional position. (Hall 1993, 101)

The dominant-hegemonic position is when the viewer, or audience member, is located within the dominant point of view. (Hall 1993, 101) Within this position, there is little misunderstanding and miscommunication, as both sender and receiver are working under the same rule set, assumptions and cultural biases. It is this position that will allow the transmission of ideas to be understood the best, despite certain frictions that may occur due to issues of class structure and power, specifically between the elites who are able to dictate the rule set and the non-elites who must adopt the elite's rules as dominant. (Hall 1993, 101)

The negotiated position is when the audience member, or receiver, is able to decode the sender's message within the context of the dominant cultural and societal views. (Hall 1993, 102) The messages are largely understood, but in a different sense than the dominant-hegemonic position. The receivers in the negotiated position are not necessarily working within the hegemonic viewpoint, but are familiar enough with dominant society to be able to adequately decode cultural texts in an abstract sense. (Hall 1993, 102) However, it is entirely possible for the audience member to decipher the message as a more personal message, which is when their own biases and viewpoints muddy the decoding process. This "near view" of the message usually occurs in certain situations that are close to the audience member, as opposed to the general "long view" they take of cultural texts in the abstract. (Hall 1993, 102)

The oppositional view is when the audience member is capable of decoding the message in the way it was intended to be decoded, but based on their own societal beliefs, often sees another, unintended meaning within the message. (Hall 1993, 103)

Examples of oppositional views in modern television programming are plentiful in Internet discussion communities (either mailing lists or message forums or weblogs). Perhaps the earliest documented cases of modern-day defiant/oppositional views of a television program were in the late 1970s in *Star Trek* 'zines (fan-produced magazine-like newsletters) which had a tendency to showcase stories that focused on the relationship between Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock on the original *Star Trek* program from the 1960s. Authors, typically female, often wrote fiction implying or outright stating that Kirk and Spock were lovers, referring to the pairing as K/S, spawning the "slash" genre that usually describes male/male romantic relationships and, sometimes, sexually explicit fiction between the characters. Slash fiction is not limited to males but can also be applied to female/female relationships that are

implied or suspected to be romantic, such as the relationship between Xena and her sidekick, Gabrielle, on *Xena: Warrior Princess*, which aired from 1995-2001. As early as the second season, the creators and writers of the show, realizing that people were interpreting the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle as romantic, deliberately wrote scenes to play with the audience's minds, teasing them with a would-be kiss between the women and scenes of them bathing together. Slash fiction, while popular, is also accompanied by traditional male/female romance fiction between two heterosexual characters, such as Jim/Pam from the highly-popular *The Office* and even Ron/Hermione fan fiction, stemming from the hugely popular *Harry Potter* series of books by J.K. Rowling.

Along with the fiction that these groups write are countless pieces of artwork, either traditionally drawn, painted or computer generated. Fan videos of these pairings are uploaded to YouTube.com regularly and even audio "mashups", which take lines from various episodes and create a new story out of them, are popular as well. It is this kind of interpretation and subsequent desire to explore that interpretation creatively that "makes it their own". If the show is still in production, fans also campaign hard for their pairing of choice to be written together.

An example of fans working to unite two characters would be the BAM campaign; fans of Bianca (Montgomery) and Maggie (Stone) on ABC's *All My Children*. The character of Bianca is a lesbian and the character of Maggie was her straight best friend. Over the course of five years, the BAM fans wrote in to the studio and writers over and over again in an attempt to spark a relationship between the characters on-screen. Eventually, the characters would get together off-screen after the actresses had both left the show, and would break up a year later, again, off-screen. The fans were so passionate about rekindling the relationship that they campaigned to bring Maggie (Elizabeth Hendrickson) back to the show for a short period while Bianca (Eden Riegel) was making a return engagement. It resulted in the two characters discussing the end of their relationship and the reasons for it, declarations of love that had never been stated so openly before and culminating in a passionate kiss.

Fiske argues that audiences are not merely passive watchers of the television screen, but rather are active audiences, engaging with the program in ways the producers never could imagine. (Fiske 1987, 79) It is through actions, such as fan fiction, fan videos, fan communities, and active campaigning for change on-screen that audiences not only absorb the meaning of the text in question, but actively engage with it.

Fiske discusses the popularity of *Dynasty* in the late 1980s; a show so popular that there would often be parties where people would have dinner and then watch *Dynasty* together. (Fiske 1987, 71) We can see examples of engagement with a community over a show in modern programming as well, particularly live finales of reality television shows, such as *Survivor* or *Dancing with the Stars* or *American Idol*.

There is certainly no shortage of the ways in which people can engage with the cultural texts that are television shows, movies, songs and books. Fan fiction and fan-based campaigns apart, these texts enter our local culture; *Survivor* spawned the catch-phrase "voted off the island", *The Simpsons* popularized "eat my shorts" and "doh!", *The A-Team's* Mr. T.'s specialty catch-phrase was "I pity the fool!". (Fiske 1987, 79) As these texts are consumed again and again, working their way through our popular culture, people engage with them in different ways, peeling away the layers and re-engaging with them all over again, constantly the active audience member.

## References

J. Fiske (1987). "Active Audiences," and "Pleasure and Play." *Television Culture*. London & NY: Methuen.

S. Hall (1993). "Encoding/Decoding." S. During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London and NY: Routledge.

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