

The multifarious preferences of the text

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Abstract

This paper surveys the literature of audience studies in light of the categories of determination and autonomy and argues the existence of flexible form of textual determination.

Recent trends in audience studies have posited the absence of a preferred meaning and shifted the focus of analysis away from the text to the viewing context. Contrarily, this paper argues that the text is a structure of multiaccented signs and should be conceptualized as a structured horizon of meaning, which limits and facilitates different readings by different audiences.

Based on a pilot study the paper discusses the limits imposed by the text in the analysis of viewing contexts.

1 Introduction

The literature on audience studies reminds me of the metaphor of the glass of water that is either half full or half empty. From a “half-full” perspective, the field can be seen as an evolutionary movement from the early crude emphasis on the effects of programs over audiences, through the one sided view of audiences as autonomous users of media, to more recent critical analysis of the relationship between texts and viewers (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990; Lewis, 1991; Moore, 1990; Morley, 1989). Paradoxically, it is in this last stage that the field starts to appear “half-empty”. Despite the variety and sophistication of its approaches, the field of audience studies is mired in a number of unresolved conceptual problems. These problems stem from the lack of an integrated body of theory and research capable of accounting for the ever widening complexity of its central object of study: the interface between the viewer and the text.

The key difficulty faced by audience studies is but one expression of the central problematic of critical cultural theory: understanding the relationship between the determinations and the autonomous dimensions of cultural practice. For audience scholars

the problem has been to conceptualize simultaneously, the determinations, which bear on the act viewing and the autonomy of the viewer in the creation of meaning. This difficulty is both conceptual and methodological. For all the studies that have claimed to shed light on this problem there have been a matching number of critiques of their theory and methodology. I don't mean to minimize the real advances in the field, but only to underscore the idea that the interface between the text and the viewer remains elusive. As Lewis (1991) points out, "We know now that the power to produce meanings lies neither within the TV message nor within the viewer, but in the active engagement between the two" (p. 58). The fact that this definition of the object of study is articulated through a double negative is symptomatic of the degree of abstraction still surrounding it. In my view, the field is still grappling with four recurring questions: What meanings do viewers make of a text? How are meanings produced? What factors influence the creation of particular meanings? What methods can be used to study the processes of viewing television?

In their efforts to understand the encounter between the audience and the text, audience scholars have used a number of theoretical and methodological categories of analysis. Despite some attempts at integration (Jensen, 1987; Jensen and Rosengren, 1990) these categories still appear disconnected in the literature and need to be integrated in a comprehensive framework. The categories that have been considered include: the socio-demographic location of the audience and their communities of meaning as determinants of the process of reading (Morley, 1980; 1986; Katz and Liebes, 1986; 1989;

Lewis, 1992; Radway, 1986), the codes used by the audience and the media makers (Condit, 1989; Hall, 1980; Lewis 1986; 1991), the reading histories of audiences, their everyday routines and interpretative frameworks (Hermes, 1993; Rogge, 1989), the pleasures the audience extract from the act of reading as a factor of resistance (Condit, 1989; Fiske, 1987; Hobson, 1989) the audience's uses of the text (Jensen, 1990), the cognitive structures employed in the act of reading (Dahlgren, 1986; Hoijer, 1992), the mode of address of different genres (Fiske, 1987) the context of reception (Morley, 1986) the influence of the media environment in meaning making (Morley and Silverstone, 1990), and the meaning which people attribute to their engagement with the medium or a certain program (Ang, 1985; Morley, 1991). Recent critiques of audience studies (Jensen, 1990; Garnham, 1990; Seaman, 1992) have placed a political question on the agenda of audience studies regarding the relationship between the audience's production of meaning and their concrete social action.

The elaboration of an integrative framework is necessary but beyond the scope of this paper. I believe the problematic of audience studies can be productively analyzed through the double categories of determination and autonomy. In this paper I will review the approaches of different critical perspectives to the question of determination and autonomy in the production of meaning. Based on an exploratory study I will propose that media texts should be seen as cues that prompt the audience to reflect on topics more or less related with the text. I will also propose that viewers' reflections are contextualized and guided by different sets of moral norms. The perspective offered here is

congruent with recent trends in audience studies, which have decentered the text, but unlike them recognizes determinations in the decentered text.

2 Critical approaches to meaning

The political economic study of communication and culture is the critical perspective most distant from a direct analysis of either the texts or the audiences. Its primary concern is with the material conditions of the production of meaning rather than its consumption in everyday life. The relevance of political economy to audience studies is based on its insights into the ways in which the economic structure of mass media organizations determine or shape the content of mass media texts. According to Nicolas Garnham (1990) “a newspaper article or TV program is the way it is and carries one set of meanings and by doing so excludes another set, because of the way in which production is organized. To put it crudely, the budget available and the given structure of the division of labor affects what you can say and how you can say it” (p.15). Herman and Chomsky (1988) also stress the structuration of media texts by the material conditions of production. These authors argue that the content of mass media news is shaped by five filters: The patterns of concentrated ownership and profit seeking motive of media companies; Advertising: Reliance on government and corporate “experts” as the major sources of news; Organized negative responses to certain news items by power groups and a pervasive neoliberal antisocialist or anti-communist ideology. They argue further that

these filters result in a pattern of news content which in effect functions as propaganda for the interests of the state and major economic groups. In addition, the majority of the world’s media and news sources is controlled and supplied by the twenty largest transnational media conglomerates (Bagdkian, 1992; Herman and Chomsky 1988).

These facts have led some political economists to claim that the material conditions of media production also directly determine the audience’s reception of media texts. In this, they have employed the support, not of the research on the audience, but of some of its tools and theoretical concepts. Garnham (1990), for example, affirms that the “interpretative frames that are used to extract meanings from media texts are themselves determined by the wider socio-economic structure” (p.15). Other authors have employed a semiotic perspective to argue for a determined reception. In their analysis of the functioning of advertising, Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1990) explain that:

If the audience is to “decode” the message adequately—that is to make the transfer of meaning—advertisers have to tap the reservoirs of cultural and social knowledge maintained by audiences, and transform this material into the message (“encode” it), developing an appropriate format and shaping the content in order that the cycle of communication that run from the audience’s experiences and back again can be completed (p.203).

The claims of political economists are not altogether off the mark—in the sense that material conditions shape the horizons of public discourses and the access to symbolic

resources-but they reduce the encounter of the audience with the text to the interplay of determined frameworks. In sum, they are neat instrumentalist views of a process, which is messy, contradictory, multidetermined and affected by the routine and changing events of everyday life. Hermes (1993), for example, reports that contrary to the first interview in which one of a respondents described her enjoyment and sense of usefulness in the reading of women's magazines, in a second interview she found them boring and without meaning. According to Hermes, this change was due her respondent's new feeling of low self-esteem provoked by the sudden emergence in her life of the man who had fathered her child.

2.1 Textual Analysis

Textual analysts, like political economists, have also employed a structuralist approach and assumed a determined reception on the part of the audience. Using a combination of semiotics and psychoanalysis, textual analysts have sought to uncover the hidden structures of the text and on that basis have developed personal readings, which they mistook to be universal. As has been repeatedly noted, these analyses although insightful and informed by theory, are just individual examples of other possible readings. Or, to put it another way, they are examples of readings undertaken in an academic context by people motivated by professional goals and who have access to a particular set of discourses. One could speculate that the same analysts in a different context, perhaps of domestic leisure, would articulate different readings of the same texts.

The psychoanalytic approach to textual

analysis has been critiqued exhaustively before, especially the work published by screen during the late seventies. Here I just want to note briefly that the main problem of audience researchers with this approach, is that it conflates the process of entry and constitution of the subject into language, with the text's interpellation of real subjects already positioned in society. The structures of the text are thus given the power to constitute and indeed immobilize a reading subject, who like the ultimate dupe swallows without protest the repressive ideologies of the text. The problem is that this fictitious subject created by the analyst was for a long time confused with people in everyday life. The result was a view of the text as the sole determinant of the meaning.

Textual analysts have also employed semiotics in their analysis of the text. The strategy in this case has been to identify different codes present in the text and their function in the creation of meaning. In addition to Barthes's (1974) codes (narrative, enigma, semiotic, semic and cultural), which can be applied to the analysis of any text, television analysts, (Fiske, 1987; Schwichtenberg, 1986) have also identified a number of visual codes on the basis of which they argued for definite readings of the text. Lewis (1991) pointed out that textual analysts have misused the concept of codes and semiotics in general "to show us not what the text could mean, but assert what it does mean" (p.34). According to Lewis, the textual analysts' claims are unwarranted because the text is a structure of signifiers and as such does not support the existence of any essential meaning. What analysts offer is their individual reading of the text not the reading of the text.

I agree with Lewis's critique of the excesses of textual analysis, but for different reasons.

2.2 The Text: Between Sign and Signifier

The view of the text as a structure of signifiers allows a space of autonomy for the audience in the process of reading, but it can also lead us to the ultimate conclusion that the text has no determination of its own. If the signifier is a material without inherent meaning, then the text as a structure of signifiers becomes devoid of meaning and open to any discourse the viewer might want to impose on it. By definition, a structure of signifiers cannot impose any determinacy on the process of reading because it has no meaning. It has nothing to impose. This is untenable, theoretically and politically.

The text can be abstracted as a structure of signifiers, but in practical terms it is always a structure of signs, because it is in a permanent encounter with a subject immersed in language. This is true whether the text is encountered at the moment of production, the moment of reading or the moment of analysis. In either case, the text is always intersected by the subjectivity of the producer, an audience member or an analyst. Just as the producer of a text works with signifiers intersected by a variety of codes, so, too, the reader of a text is pulled into the orbit not of signifiers, but of multiaccented signs. The moment of the encounter with the text is the moment of meaning. The encounter with a signifier happens in a second moment, when the analyst consciously detaches him or herself from the text, armed with the conceptual tools of analysis. As for the text sitting on the shelf not read or seen, it is a structure of

signifiers, but it is also socially and theoretically irrelevant.

The move to open up the text was grounded on the separation of the text from the intentions of its producer. This, however, was taken to the extreme position of extricating any semblance of inscribed subjectivity from the text. In my view, there is a need to acknowledge that the text is produced by subjectivity and that it carries an intention towards meaning in the form of a structure of multiaccented signs. The advantage of conceiving the text as a structure of multiaccented signs, rather than as a structure of signifiers, is that it allows us to retain a degree of textual determination in the process of reading.

2.3 The Semiotic Models of Audience Studies

While political economists and textual analysts have discussed the structural determinants of meaning, the study of the process of meaning production as an encounter between the audience and the text, began with the publishing of Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and the subsequent development of audience studies. The encoding/decoding model is based on the idea that TV texts are encoded from within the set of frameworks the encoders use to make meaning of the world, and that the process of decoding can be done from within similar or different frameworks from those employed in the encoding process. Depending on the nature of the frameworks used in the decoding process, viewers can endorse, negotiate or oppose the meanings which have been encoded (Lewis, 1991).

2.4 Preferred Meaning: Placed and Displaced

The idea of a preferred meaning encoded in the text has been the pivotal element of the model, but has also been a constant source of conceptual and methodological difficulties. Morley (1981) in his poscript to the “Nationwide Audience” asked:

Is the preferred reading a property of the text *per se*? Or is it something that can be generated from the text (by a “skilled” reading) via certain specifiable procedures? Or is the preferred reading that reading which the analyst is predicting that most members of the audience will produce from the text? In short, is the preferred reading a property of the text, the analyst or the audience? (p.6).

These questions are central to audience studies, because the preferred meaning is the semiotic material that stands at the confluence between the audience and the text. According to Lewis (1991) “What the question [posed by Morley] requires us to address is how and when the preferred meaning is constituted” (p. 63).

The questions posed by Morley have been answered in different ways. The research seems to show that the characteristics of the preferred meaning vary with the particular audience and text being researched and need to be determined empirically in each specific research case. Condit (1989), for example, found that the preferred meaning of a Cagney and Lacey show about abortion could be clearly identified in the text. According to her, even though her two respondents—a pro-life man and a pro-choice woman—had

different responses to the show, they had understood the plot in a similar way. In this case, the consistency between the readings of the respondents and of the analyst enabled the later to identify the preferred reading of the text without many problems.

Identifying the preferred meaning is not always so simple, however, and can become quite complex. Lewis (1991) elaborated a distinction between the preferred reading/three response model and what he called the popular/resistive reading model. According to him, the preferred reading/three response model is only valid when we have an unambiguous preferred reading that is decoded similarly by everyone. That is, after reading the text similarly, viewers then choose to respond to it in an oppositional, negotiated or endorsing way. Contrary to the way they have been traditionally conceived, the oppositional, negotiated or endorsing readings are not really readings but second stage responses to the preferred meaning first identified in the text. The popular/resistive reading model is based on the assumption of the inexistence of a preferred meaning in a particular research situation. Here I use the expression “particular research situation” rather than “the text” or “the audience” to underscore two points. First, a qualitative audience study is a specific meeting point between a text and an audience mediated by the researcher as the instrument of inquiry. Second, given these contextual factors and its small samples, the conclusions of a qualitative audience study cannot be generalized beyond the research situation at hand. The contextualization of conclusions would endow much audience research an added degree of reliability and avoid some of

the theoretical confusion which follow from unwarranted general conclusions.

Based on his analysis of Radways' "Reading the Romance" (1984) and Fiske's (1987) research on the Newlywed Game, Lewis (1991) concluded that these were examples of research situations which lacked a preferred meaning. Instead, the texts presented a number of ambiguities, which were exploited with pleasure by the viewers to construct readings that resisted the dominant social ideology of patriarchy. In this case, the viewers did not oppose the text, but worked with its polysemic and ambiguous message to oppose a societal ideology. The popular/resistive reading doesn't need to "self-consciously draw upon other discourses [because] the material for the reading is already in the program" (p. 70). Lewis adds that the Newlywed Game "both exposes and endorses patriarchy" (p.69).

In his own research on the English show the News at Ten and the Cosby Show, Lewis (idem) also found evidence of the absence of a preferred meaning. According to Lewis, the Cosby Show is structured in a manner such that "most white people see an upper-middle class family and most black people see a black family, while both see them as a normal group they can identify with" (p.196).

In the News at Ten, Lewis also posited the absence of a preferred reading in all but one of the news items. Not because of ambiguity or polysemy in the text, but because of the lack of a narrative structure capable of engaging the viewers and help them make connections between the different ideas presented. As the author points out, this didn't diminish the ideological power of the show since the bits and pieces that the viewers un-

derstood created resonances and associations with dominant ideological discourses available to the viewers outside the text.

Based on the analysis of Condit's, Fiske's and his own research, Lewis reaches two conclusions: first, that the preferred meaning is absent from a research situation in which the text appears ambiguous and polysemic. Second, that the ideological power of the text also works through ambiguity and polysemy. Lewis' conclusions contradict each other. Since ideology works through the articulation of some sets of meanings and the concealment of others, Lewis' analysis indicate that the preferred meaning of the text can be present in the face of ambiguity and polysemy. I disagree with Lewis' conclusions, not with his analysis of the research.

2.5 Preferred Horizons

Lewis' analysis demonstrates that the News at Ten was successfully encoded with an ideological meaning that was read both by the analyst and the respondents. In the absence of a coherent narrative structure, the preferred meaning was located in those fragments of the text that were more salient to the viewers. As an example, Lewis (1991) reports that the scenes of violence between Arabs and Jews was the fragment of the West Bank story that caught the attention of the viewers, and that the whole story was then interpreted with a "residually racist" discourse, as one of the "world's troubled spots".

Lewis' analysis of his research on the Cosby Show also supports the idea that the preferred meaning can be present through the ambiguities of the text. While, as Lewis notes, the Cosby Show created spaces of identification for both black and white vi-

ewers, it also concealed the existence of racism to white audiences and class differences to black audiences. The result is a message that supports the attainability of the “American dream”. Similarly, the show also appears ambiguous on the issue of gender relations. Although most male and female viewers thought the show had an anti-sexist message, two men pointed to the show’s contradictions and noted that Claire was the one checking the roast. A working class gay man, on the other hand, focused on the differences between the behaviors of men and women while a teenage boy thought the show was about being one self.

While the research situation of the News at Ten presented a preferred meaning through absences of contextual information and resonances with elements outside of the text, the research situation of the Cosby Show demonstrates not the absence of a preferred meaning but the presence of several preferred meanings. The Cosby Show is an example of a sophisticated text that harbors different preferred meanings and spaces of identification for different audiences. The survey of the research shows that whether the preferred meaning appears as a shared reading of the text (Condit, 1989), or as a field of multiple readings (Fiske, 1987; Lewis, 1991), it is still structured as an horizon of meaning which imposes a set of limits on the audience’s readings. The corollary view is that the preferred meaning is a structure of signs, which facilitates certain readings of the text by different audiences.

2.6 Resistive Readings/Preferred Readings

Lewis (1991) posited that the resistive reading, was an ideologically progressive reading, which was fed by the texts’ ambiguities in the absence of a preferred meaning. Unlike the oppositional reading situation in which the viewer mobilizes codes outside of the text to critique the preferred meaning he or she first read in the text, the resistive reading uses the codes of the text to construct an anti-hegemonic view of the world. According to Lewis, the resistive reading was incompatible with the existence of a preferred meaning. The conceptualization of the preferred meaning, as a structured horizon of meanings however, allows us to accommodate the notion of resistive reading. The resistive reading becomes one of the meanings preferred by the text.

In Fiske’s (1989) research of the Newlywed game, the exposure of patriarchy is limited to the denial of an extreme and obvious form of machismo. While on one hand the denial of machismo never reaches the level of a feminist discourse against male domination, on the other hand the women who resist the machist environment of the show are penalized by losing points in the game. The resistive reading of patriarchy was at the same time facilitated (preferred) and hegemonized by the text. Similarly in the Cosby Show the resistive identification of black viewers with the Huxtables allowed by the text is contextualized by the illusion of the attainability of the American Dream.

The conceptualization of the preferred meaning as a structured horizon implies the idea that the preferred meaning is encoded as a structure of signs, which are read differen-

tly by different audiences in specific research situations. It also implies that the preferred meaning takes ranges from an unproblematic reading shared by the audiences and the analyst involved in the research, to multiple readings contained and hegemonized by the horizon of the text. This conceptual flexibility allows us to avoid the two equally undesirable traps of thinking of the text as either fully open or fully determinant of the process of reading. The preferred meaning thus remains a privileged area to study the intersection between the determination of the text and the autonomy of the viewer.

3 From meaning to context

Perhaps due to the difficulties of research design and the elusiveness of the encounter between texts and viewers, in recent years audience researchers have shifted from the study of meaning production to the study of the contexts of viewing. This new turn has employed an ethnographic approach to the study of the audience. Here the research presents two foci: the first is the study of the meaning that viewers make out the act of watching television, the second is the study of the influence of the different elements of the viewing environment in the act of viewing. Although there have been various calls to study the relationships between the text, the viewer and the context of viewing and to integrate textual analysis with ethnographic studies (Moore, 1990) the reality is that the text has receded into the background of analysis. In his introduction of *Family Television*, Morley (1986) revealed that his focus of interest had shifted from:

The analysis of the pattern of differential “readings” of particular program materials, to the analysis of the domestic viewing context itself—as the framework within which “readings of programs are (ordinarily) made. (p.14)

Following the trend inaugurated by Radway (1984) and Morley (1986) ethnographic audience researchers have focused on such elements as the influence of changing patterns of everyday life (Rogge, 1989; Hermes, 1993), the daily rituals of the viewers (Rogge, 1989; Seiter et. al, 1989)), and gender relations in the domestic environment (Morley, 1986) in the act of viewing. Researchers have also studied and the integration of soap operas in the work environment (Hobson, 1989) and an interest in the influence of the technological environment of home in the process of viewing is also emerging (Morley & Silverstone, 1990; Morley, 1991). While before, the production of meaning was an absolute given, independent of any contextual factors, now the meaning of television is seen to be dependent on the changing circumstances taking place not only during the course of one’s life, but also during the course of one’s day. According to Morley and Silverstone (1990):

The question may not be so much whether the “reading” model applies to television (as such) rather a question of when, for which categories of viewing, in which settings and in relation to which types of programming this model can be usefully applied (p.44).

In practice, however the research has focused more on the analysis of the contexts of

viewing then the readings of the texts. The ethnographic turn of audience studies brings an added degree of precision and specificity to the study of television viewing, but it also seems to be leading to a total decentering of the text in favor of the context of reading. Fiske's call for an object audience studies in which "there is no text, there is no audience, there are only the processes of viewing—that variety of cultural activities that take place in front of the screen", is symptomatic. More than the preferred meaning or some form of textual determination, it is the text itself that runs the risk of becoming irrelevant to audience studies.

4 Textual determination and reading contexts

The research situations of ethnographic audience studies have made visible a new link between texts and viewers. Given the different sets of questions and concerns of the analyst, the text now becomes the leit-motif for the viewer's discussion of issues in everyday life rather than the material used for the construction of meaning of the world. It is as if the text provides the viewer with a set cues for the reflection of issues, some of which are only remotely related to the text. The interview transcripts of various researchers (Gross, 1989; Hobson's, 1989; Morley, 1986; Rogge, 1989; Tulloch, 1989) show that the discussion about television often wonders into accounts of personal stories, experiences and opinions about the world. One of Gross's excerpts from his research on mass media and sexual minorities is a telling example:

I used to watch Hill Street Blues regularly,

but I mostly don't bother anymore...it used to try to demonstrate the ambiguity that people felt towards each other and towards their work. Now it's just the traditional good guys against the bad guys. I think it's a reflection of the Reagan Era. (p.140)

The cueing role of the text was especially evident in a small-scale pilot study on the NBC news I conducted during the period of one week during the summer of 1994.

4.1 The NBC News Study

For this study I interviewed an American man in his mid-fifties who was a television technician and a German woman in her early thirties who was a special education teacher. At the time of the interview I had a formal but cordial relationship with both of the respondents. Each respondent was separately shown four stories from an NBC prime time news-show and then interviewed. The man was interviewed at his work place and the woman at home, the settings deemed more convenient by the respondents. The news items shown were: A story about a fire in a social club, a story about Lithuania's independence from Russia, a story about dieting and a story about Panama in the aftermath of the American invasion.

4.1.1 Summary of the Stories

1. The Happy Land Social Club. The story starts with Jane Pauley, telling the viewers that a Latino social club in New York City had been set on fire and 87 people had died. The story proceeds with the field reporter explaining, over a montage of shots of the fire and the suspect being arraigned, that the suspect

was a Cuban man who had a fight with his girlfriend and was out of a job. Next the reporter establishes that the social club lacked required safety conditions and that been ordered to close down. However, since city officials failed to reinspect it the club had remained open. The story moves to a press conference with Mayor Dinkins in which he announces a crack down on other social clubs in similar conditions. Pauley makes a segway and the story proceeds with images of praying and grieving in the neighborhood. The story proceeds with an interview with the Bronx bishop defending the need for the existence of social clubs in areas where people have scarce means of recreation. The story closes with a report of the efforts of the Red Cross in the neighborhood.

2. Lithuania. The story starts with Pauley's introduction and moves to images the Russian army occupying a building that had been taken over by Lithuania's government. While the reporter explains Lithuania's move for independence, we are shown images of talks between Lithuanian and Russian leaders. This is followed by a quick interview excerpt of Lithuania's president stating that he doesn't trust the intentions of Russian authorities. The story proceeds with images of a demonstration by of a group of Russians and the comments of a Lithuanian man telling the Russians that they shouldn't create obstacles to Lithuania's independence. Images of pamphlets falling from a Russian helicopter are followed

by a general comment of the reporter closing the story.

3. Dieting. Pauley opens the story by telling us that there are 65 million people in the US on a diet and many of those are in weight loss programs. The story proceeds with visuals of public figures accompanied by a commentary about their weight loss programs. The story proceeds with images of a congressional hearing featuring people that had been hurt while on weight loss programs. These images are accompanied by a commentary about the potential danger of weight loss clinics. Comments of critics and advocates of weight loss programs follow. Pauley closes by stating that the Bush administration is considering to regulate weight loss programs.
4. Panama. Pauley opens with the information that in the wake of the US invasion of Panama, the Latin-American country had been deeply scarred. She added that the Bush administration was asking Congress for 500 million dollars in aid for Panama. The story moves to images of American soldiers in Panama, followed by images of wreckage and homeless people. The reporter comments that none of the planned programs of reconstruction have yet been funded. Images of homeless Panamanians being moved away from their makeshift shacks is interspersed with interviews of Panamanian leaders.

4.2 Design and Methodology

The stories were first analyzed by the group of researchers involved in the project. From these analysis we assumed a range of potential readings of the stories. Based on these assumed readings we elaborated a set of questions for each news story. Each questionnaire started with the same two general questions: What was the story about? and What do you remember happening? These questions were meant at the outset to release the viewer's own understandings of each news item. The aim of the remaining questions was to probe the viewers' understanding of the saliences we had previously identified in the text. The questions also aimed to reveal the codes the viewers deployed in their interpretation. The interviews followed a semi-structured format that on one hand covered the concerns of the researchers and on the other, followed the interests and free associations of the viewers.

4.3 Analysis

The analysis of the transcripts revealed two significant categories recurring throughout the interviews. The first was that the text functioned as a cue for the viewers' discussion of different topics. The second, was that the viewers evaluated different stories from within the same set of ethical concerns. In the course of explaining what he thought about the social club story Jeff said:

So Dinkins, Mayor Dinkins put the police on to close down the social clubs, but I don't think they can do that realistically. I think that people have to learn to protect their lives. Like myself, if I go to the movies, if I go to a large crowd I always sit

on the outside seat...You don't just go to some place to just have a good time and drink. You think, if I have to get out of here how do I get out?

Later, when asked about possible solutions to problems like the fire in the Happy Land social club, Jeff answered:

Try to get to the people. Put out the word, if you're going to do this try to do it safely. Every once in while you see on the news some of these drug places, say NY or Chicago, any large city where citizens get mad. Say there's a park or any large place for kids to play, but kids can't do it anymore because the drug dealers have taken over. There was a story recently about a woman who got mad, who got the decent—or the so-called—decent people together and they went over there and they spent all night. They got a fire going and they took the park back. Now to me that's the way things should be done...you can't rely on the police...but you take your parks back your land back. That's the way to do it.

Asked to describe the Diet story Jeff said first that he had obese relatives and then:

They talked about diet pieces and the detrimental effects that it has on everybody. The problem with this country is that thin is beautiful. If you're overweight 2 pounds you're ugly. Very little tolerance...I think that we've learned that for humanity that we remain sensitive to the fact that not everybody's perfect, not everybody beautiful, but yet they do have feelings, if you don't like the way they are just don't go near them.

These answers are surprising because they don't directly address the issues and events of the story. The first excerpt reveals that the viewing of the social club story didn't elicit Jeff's reflection on the events of the story *per se*, but functioned like a cue for Jeff's discussion of the measures he takes to ensure his own safety. The second and third excerpts illustrate the same point. Unlike what the researchers had expected, Jeff's solution to the problem was not related to the apprehension of Latino criminals or better inspection by the city, but was about individual responsibility and voluntarism. The story of the diet prompted Jeff to discuss his philosophy of human acceptance and individual responsibility. In fact this ethic of individualism and of doing the right thing pervaded Jeff's discussion of the stories. In reference to the Lithuania story Jeff said:

I admire people who go into the unknown and that's what they are doing. They are expressing the fact that they want independence, want to go their own way, want to lead their own lives.

Ann's discussion of the stories was filtered by her main concern of whether the "two sides" of the stories had been presented. Asked what she remembered happening in the social club story, Ann starts by saying:

They described the guy who was accused of doing it. I was very aware of the fact that they let the police speak. Not that the media accused him of doing something, but that they reported the police statement about him...If they accuse someone of doing something they should have him talk about it himself.

On the Lithuania story:

The main story was that they showed people from this part of the Soviet Republic in opposition to the Russian army. And by the way, they showed mainly the Lithuanian point of view, they didn't show the Russian's point of view.

After confessing that she had dieted at a younger age, Ann said:

When I watched this I thought of one commercial they have where one of these, I think it's a baseball coach or whatever—and he shows that he has lost forty pounds within a couple of months...you have the impression that he still eats reasonably, he has proper meals and doesn't just eat chemicals, and that looks like a real healthy way of losing weight. But that isn't it at all. There are dangerous issues to be checked out first. And they showed the two sides.

5 Conclusion

The analysis of the transcripts reveals that the respondents and the analyst shared a basic interpretation of the Panama story, but that a preferred meaning could not be established in the other stories. The research shows that in the absence of a preferred meaning the text prompted the viewers to discuss different topics. The degree to which the viewers' discussions relate with the topics of the text seems to be dependent on the extent to which those topics resonated with the viewer's life experiences. The research also shows that the respondents employed the same ethical perspective in the discussion of all the stories.

The findings in this pilot study suggest that some viewers bring a set of sedimented ideas and beliefs to their encounter with the text. Unlike other codes the viewer might employ these ideas and beliefs are consistently used regardless of the specificity of the stories. These findings also support the idea that the text constitutes a horizon of meaning with different forms and degrees of influence upon the viewer. While the text cannot guarantee the nature of the discussion it can prompt the viewer to reflect on particular topics. The multifarious preferences of the text are at work in the living room.

6 References

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