

Active audience theory is “pointless populism” (Seaman, 1992). Critically discuss.

The 1980s was a decade that saw the rise of a huge amount of ethnographic research methods studying the viewing practices of audiences. As a result of these studies, theorists such as John Fiske, David Morley and Stuart Hall began, with varying levels of validity, to discuss the notion of the active audience. This concept implied that a message could no longer be understood by an audience as some kind of package (Alasuutari, 1999). The idea that an audience can negotiate with a media text and not simply believe and take in the ideologies behind it anticipates a certain amount of sophistication amongst an audience. The active audience theory therefore provides a much more optimistic outlook on the culture industry than the notion that audiences are simply passive dupes, who receive and accept dominant ideologies fed to them by mainstream media. In his paper titled 'Active audience theory: pointless populism', William Seaman argues that “the active audience approach has tended more to mystify rather than to clarify, to rationalise a set of practices rather than explain them” (309: 1992). Seaman's paper criticises some of the work of scholars such as Morley and Fiske. His notion of “pointless populism” (1992) represents a false celebration of the active audience. In this paper, I will argue that, although Seaman raises some relevant arguments, his views are mostly far too extreme. I will then look into work regarding similar issues from other scholars and assess the relevance of these issues alongside the work of Seaman.

Seaman's examination of audience theory, although mostly controversial, does present a few interesting and valid ideas. For example, he says that “members of subgroups can interpret texts as an affirmation of their prejudices” (1992: 301). It is a hugely relevant and significant point, and perhaps one that scholars such as Fiske rather ignore, that an oppositional reading of a text from a particular subculture may have negative effects on a society. An example of this would be, using

Seaman's idea, confirming a particular subculture's negative prejudices towards another subculture. As Seaman suggests, the consequences of these mediated effects could lead to violent conduct within a society. "Often the poor are the most productive consumers – their creativity is not determined by cost" (Fiske, 1989: 35). Here, the main point that Fiske is making is that mass culture can be oppositional and thus productive in their acts of consumption. However there is little consideration as to whether these oppositional acts are a good thing for society. Fiske simply describes these acts as "creative", with little acknowledgement of what they actually might be. Seaman's idea, that meanings in texts can affirm the prejudices of members of particular subcultures therefore becomes an important issue when looking at audience theory, as it offers a fresh insight when looking into media effects.

Similarly, Seaman (1992) goes on to suggest that a plurality of readings in texts can result in some readings affirming, encouraging and even amplifying certain prejudices. Seaman provides the example of racism in popular culture to highlight this process, presenting the idea that in 1992, there was one form of racism that remained acceptable in US media, anti-Arab racism. He says, "Whether in soap operas, situation comedies, political cartoons, romance novels or Halloween costumes, the 'crazed Arab terrorist', the 'Middle East madman', and the 'oil-rich sheik' have become ideological icons of truly mythic proportions" (Seaman, 1992: 309). For Seaman, the fact that "many people in the US accepted, and even celebrated, the deaths of 200,000 Iraqi soldiers and civilians in the Gulf War and its aftermath" (1992: 309) demonstrated the idea that racist ideologies in US popular culture were having negative effects on audiences. It is important to note here that some members of the US public may have had pre-conceived prejudices towards Arabs before they passively accepted racist ideologies that were fed to them, in Seaman's view, through popular culture. According to him, "The media effects approach, in this sense, comes at the problem backwards, by starting with the media and then trying to lasso connections from there on to social

beings, rather than the other way round” (Gauntlett, 1998: 120). Seaman identifies a problem with racist ideology in US media, and assumes a connection between this, and racism amongst the US public. As Gauntlett acknowledges, this is the wrong way to look into media effects. Thus, a flaw in Seaman's assumption, is that he tackles the media effects model from the wrong end. Furthermore, “many people supporting deaths” is hardly concrete evidence to support Seaman's idea, that racist ideology causes racist beliefs.

Despite apparent flaws in Seaman's arguments regarding prejudice ideologies amplifying racist beliefs, the fact that these issues are still being discussed in today's media world would suggest some relevance and truth towards his proposition. The Fox Network television series, *24*, is an extremely successful American drama that is now a hugely important part of US culture. The fictional show documents a day in the life of Jack Bauer, working for the fictional Los Angeles based company Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU), in which he pulls off numerous heroic acts to prevent the day's latest terrorist attack. In this show, “Jack represents the possibility of decisive action – unimpeded presidential will – in an age of terror” (O'Donnell, 2008: 18). The show received mass criticism for its depiction of Muslims who, in this instance, represented the “age of terror”. These criticisms led to a complaint made by the Council on American-Islamic Relations that depicting Muslims as terrorists could “contribute to an atmosphere that it's OK to harm and discriminate against Muslims” (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2005). This issue is extremely similar to the anti-Arab issue raised by Seaman in 1992. The fact that a similar issue is being discussed over a decade later suggests that this particular argument is a part of Seaman's paper that can be said to have some relevance attached to it.

One of the ways that Seaman tries to argue that active audience theory is “pointless populism” is by criticising some of the ethnographic methods and findings used by Morley (1986) in his study titled

'Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure'. Seaman is extremely critical of the whole process of ethnographic research, "One constructs an interpretation, a narrative or scenario that is consistent with the 'facts' presented from the 'field investigations' and the scenario's plausibility is allowed to rest solely on its coherence with those 'facts' (Seaman, 1992: 302).

Morley's (2006) paper titled 'Unanswered Questions in Audience Research', assumed by many as a response to Seaman's paper, acknowledges the flaws in ethnographic methods. "Ethnography is a fine thing, but it always runs the danger of descending into anecdotalism" (Morley, 2006: 8). Here, Morley accepts that because methods are mainly ethnographic, producing qualitative results, the findings are flawed. "It is a real puzzle as to why so few people ever use numbers in contemporary audience research" (2006: 8). Morley's view on ethnography is consequently extremely open-minded; he is clearly able to accept the flaws in the method that Seaman similarly recognises and thus criticises. Morley shows an acceptance that other methods, perhaps providing quantitative data, are clearly required before making bold statements surrounding the active audience theory. Despite Morley's disregard for certain ethnographic methods, his claims about the active audience remain the same:

"It is quite another thing to imagine that there is anything to be gained by returning to simple-minded models of media power which fail to grasp Fiske's entirely correct argument that, in crossing over into the popular, any ideology pays a price for its hegemonic reach – in so far as, in the very process of becoming popular, it is inevitably 'made over' into something other than its propagators intended." (Morley, 2006: 3)

Seaman criticises ethnographic methods to help disregard the claims that scholars such as Morley made. The fact that Morley similarly criticises ethnography in a later work, but continues to support the notion of the active audience, brands Seaman's specific point here irrelevant.

Perhaps the most significant differences of opinion between Seaman and Fiske, with regards to audience theory, are centred on ideology. Seaman sees ideology as a tool for manipulating and

controlling audiences. He would suggest that it would not be a completely ludicrous understanding of the possible influences of television images in our society to think that media texts control viewers minds, and that television is “a network of boundaries restricting available information, views and images” (1992: 307). Seaman's extreme dismissal of the active audience theory therefore explains his support of the notion of “pointless populism”. Conversely, Fiske would suggest that “in the negotiation between a text and a subject/reader, the balance of power lies with the reader” (Fiske, 1987: 66). These two scholars offer contrasting extreme stances on the power of ideology, and it is therefore vital to look at other scholars work before coming to definite conclusions on the subject matter.

In his book titled 'The Sublime Object of Ideology', Slavoj Žižek (1989) introduces the notion that the media acts as the cultural wallpaper to our lives. Žižek presents the concept of enunciation, an idea that there are filters preventing us from recognising the deeply ideological nature of our most familiar experiences. This idea, that the media's manipulating ideology is everywhere is reinforced by Baudrillard (1994) when he suggests that the real is no longer real. “It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (Baudrillard, 1994: 2). Baudrillard suggests that mediated signs are ever-present in society and thus, like Žižek, he believes that the media consequently become a wallpaper to shape our lives. What is important here, when referring back to Seaman's ideas, is the notion of false consciousness. In the eyes of theorists such as Baudrillard, Žižek and Althusser, we as an audience are most susceptible to ideology when we are unaware of its manipulation. As Althusser (1970: 100) highlights, “The tenacious obviousness of the point of view of production alone or even of that of mere productive practice are so integrated into our everyday 'consciousness' that it is extremely hard, not to say almost impossible, to raise oneself to the point of view of reproduction”. In the eyes of these scholars, we live in a society that is constantly open to media texts, a society where, according to Baudrillard, “the real is no longer real”(1994: 2). For

Althusser, amongst others, this creation of false consciousness among audiences will ultimately leave them susceptible to dominant ideology, linking back to Seaman's (1992) idea of ideology as a tool for manipulating audiences. Something that neither Fiske nor Seaman refer to in enough detail when looking into the power, or lack of power, of ideology is the notion of false consciousness. Because of this notion, what comes across in the media as normal and unthreatening can actually be the most ideologically significant and thus manipulative, as supposed active audience members are unaware of ideologies being fed to them. The concept of false consciousness would definitely aid Seaman's argument. This area of ideology in audience research therefore needs to be looked into in greater detail before scholars such as Seaman can make such bold claims disregarding the active audience theory.

This idea, that ideology is used to manipulate, and that “culture is a form of class domination” (Stevenson, 1996: 97) is openly opposed by Fiske, whose perceived over-celebration of the active audience theory is one of the reasons for Seaman's notion of “pointless populism”. Fiske's belief is that audiences can negotiate with texts in differing ways, reducing the power of ideology, “To be popular, the television text has to be read and enjoyed by a diversity of social groups, so its meanings must be capable of being inflected in a number of different ways. The television text is therefore more polysemic than earlier theorists thought” (1987: 66). It is my view that this belief is true to an extent; audiences can negotiate and even oppose dominant ideologies fed to them through mainstream media. Fiske's characterisation of the behaviour of audiences provides an extremely optimistic view on the culture industry. His idea that consumers can negotiate with texts to produce new meaning in creative ways greatly contrasts with Seaman's perhaps bleak idea, that audiences can be manipulated and controlled.

Seaman's more pessimistic take would be shared by scholars such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Adorno and Horkheimer's view of mass culture and society clearly differs from that of Fiske's. It is possible however that the 45 year gap between when these scholars were writing explains the difference in opinion. Adorno et al (1999[1944]) present the idea that consumers simply appear as statistics and advertisers can categorise and divide them into large groups. This idea presumes that mass culture lacks originality and that audiences passively accept the ideologies fed to them through the means of a media text. I find this viewpoint somewhat bleak as it implies a lack of culture and sense of individualism. Having said this, Adorno et al were writing at the time of the Second World War when propaganda was a successful technique used to manipulate masses time and time again. Nowadays, as Fiske would point out, mass culture has much more of a sense of individualism and Adorno et al's views come across as dated. It could therefore be said that Seaman's notion that audiences remain passive is not only an extremely pessimistic one but also a false and dated look on the culture industry. As Fiske would recognise, audiences can now be seen to show more resistance to mass culture.

Another of Seaman's key points in his criticism of the active audience theory is the critique of the choice of the word 'interaction' when referring to the relationship between an audience member and the specific text at hand. Seaman is quite openly dismissive of what the word implies, "'Interacting' suggests the viewer has some 'effect' on the television programme, clearly this is not taking place" (Seaman, 1992: 306). Seaman acknowledges that "the viewer may interact with the television when they switch it off or on" (1992: 306), but fails to recognise the significance, or 'effects' of these actions. Switching a television off, choosing not to 'take part' in the specific day's viewing practices, is an example of 'doing nothing'. As Corrigan states, "The main action of British subculture is, in fact, 'doing nothing'" (1993: 84). Jefferson and Hall (1993) discuss how youth subcultures resist dominant culture through rituals, in this instance, the ritual can be seen as

switching the television off, or, 'doing nothing'. Ultimately, if large numbers of people are not viewing mass audience programming, designed to produce maximum profit, the producers will have to change and develop the content at hand, meaning that the simple act of 'switching off' or, in this instance, not switching on at all, does in fact have an extremely significant effect on the television programme. Seaman fails to recognise the significance of this, and the effect that it will ultimately have on the producers of the television programme in question. It can thus be said, that by criticising the term interaction, Seaman fails to recognise the significance of what effect viewers can potentially have on television programming.

A development of Seaman's criticism of the notion of interaction is his idea that television programmes are simply audio-visual signals, that cannot be altered by the viewer. He uses this idea to further criticise the active audience theory and add weight to his overall argument, that active audience theory is simply "pointless populism". "The text, in its concrete manifestation as an audio-visual signal, is not altered by the viewer" (Seaman, 1992: 306). In his paper titled 'Encoding/decoding' Stuart Hall (1980) speaks about how audiences can interpret or decode texts in varying ways. Hall introduces three hypothetical positions for decoding; the dominant hegemonic position, the negotiated position, and the oppositional position. Hall's three hypothetical positions, particularly the oppositional position, show that he believes texts can have differing effects depending on the viewer. In the eyes of Hall therefore, Seaman's method of simply looking at a text as an audio-visual signal that is not altered by the viewer would be seen as basic and incorrect. Hall describes his oppositional reading as "detotalizing the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference" (1980: 138). It can be said that different audience members have different frameworks of reference from which to base their readings of a particular text. These differing frameworks of reference will ultimately provide alternative decoding, in the method described by Hall. I would therefore suggest, like Hall, that it is

too simplistic and even basic to suggest that texts are simply audio-visual signals that are not altered or varyingly decoded by the viewer.

Seaman greatly criticises the work of scholars such as Fiske and Morley, and strongly opposes the idea of the active audience theory. It is my view that although Seaman raises some relevant arguments, his dismissal of the active audience theory is ultimately incorrect. Seaman's notion of “pointless populism” provides a bleak and even patronising view of media audiences, assuming that they are unable to negotiate with texts presented to them via the mainstream media. In my opinion, Fiske's, amongst other scholar's, support of the active audience theory not only provides a more optimistic view on the culture industry, but also a more realistic one. Having said this, there are areas of the active audience theory that require much greater research before definite conclusions can be reached. By using the work of other scholars writing about the active audience theory, I have attempted to show that audiences can never fully be seen as active or passive, and it is therefore incorrect to claim that the active audience theory is “pointless populism”. It is the line between these two notions of audience viewing practices that provides the fascinating debates regarding audience activity. The “indifferent audience” (Pasquier, cited in Morley: 2006), an audience that can sometimes be active, and sometimes passive, is perhaps thus a more suitable title to refer to audiences when approaching research regarding audience viewing practices.

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