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# Constructing and Negotiating Meaning: Audience Reception

University of Georgia: JRM 8070 Media, Culture and Diversity  
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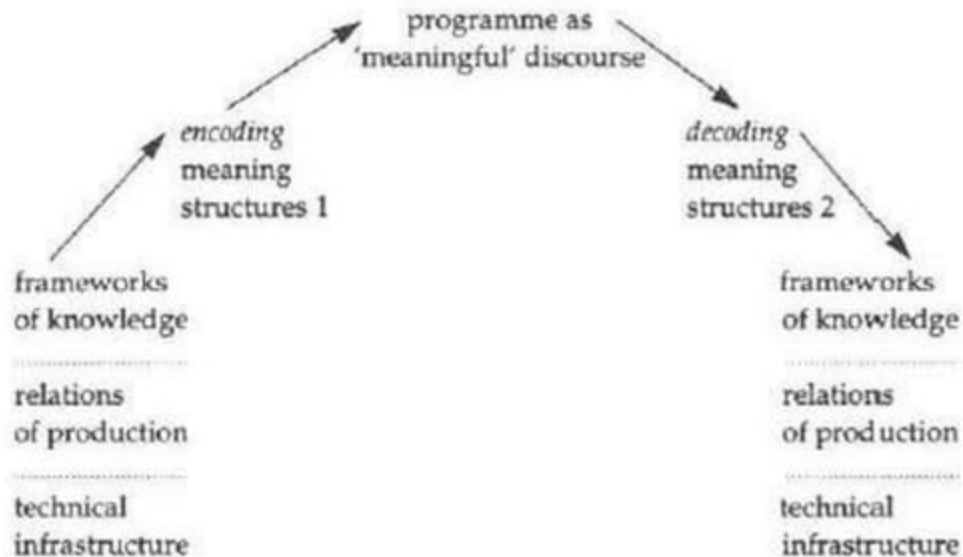
# Our Toolbox for the Day...

- Readings to discuss (topical , not linear)
  - Hall – Foundational Theory for discussion
  - Condit – Additional considerations for decoding
  - Guzman – Movie *Frida* – production and reception. Raises questions of authenticity and representation (encoding) as well as how different groups read the same text (decoding)
  - Acosta-Alzuru – Telenovela production and consumption.
- Video
  - Southern Comfort (2001)

# Stuart Hall – Encoding/Decoding

- This week's title... "Constructing and Negotiating Meaning: Audience Reception"... What do these terms mean to you?
- What is Hall's theory of Encoding/Decoding?
- A move away from linear sender – message – receiver. Communication is a more complex process
- Not "Effect" (change of thought or behavior) but site of discourse

# Encoding / Decoding



# Encoding

- Let's begin with the production process - Encoding
- What are some influences on production?
  - Influence of production personnel
  - Industry constraints. Political Economy, systems of ownership, Internal Standards & Practices
  - Government – FCC
  - Audience feedback
  - Political action groups (One Million Moms)

# Acosta-Alzuru

Influences on production...

## Writer Influence

- *El pais de la mujeres* – Written by Leonardo Padron. Creates a plot with feminist overtones, new for Venezuela
- Influence from politically charged culture. *Cosita Rica* – Corporation w/ divided employees as metaphor for Venezuela
- *Ciudad Bendita* – political statement about Venezuelans obsession with vanity.

## Government Influence

- Chavez meets w/ CEO and Venevision content = no longer critical
- Conclusion: Telenovela as a link between media, culture and society

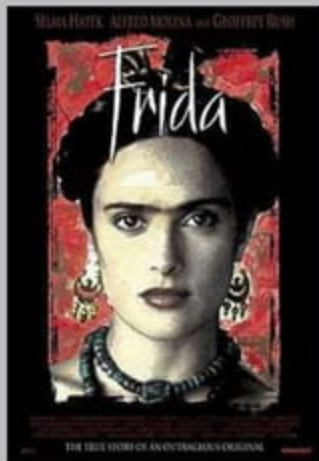


# Guzman

Influences on production...

In *Frida*, how is ethnicity produced?

- Use of mise-en-scene – colors, folkloric dress, artifacts and music. Attempt to create an authentic ethnic identity.
- What's not included is important too! Left out parts from biography about sexuality – leave open concept of being “available” and narrative tools – the love story that moves the narrative forward and not the political story.
- Played up Hayek's sexuality. Created a “familiar” identity rather than an “authentic” identity
- Issues of actors nationalities, filming locations, workers, etc...



# Encoding / Decoding - *Girls*



Hannah – the voice of her generation?

Coming of age stories dealing with jobs, parents, sex, drugs



Lena Dunham 

@lenadunham

 Follow

This was not the intended effect of the episode RT  
[@nataliahelena2](#) leeeena i wanna do cocaine like.  
You disn in your show i love girls

2:47 AM - 10 Feb 13

741 RETWEETS 855 FAVORITES



# Back to what Hall says...

- How do viewers interpret media messages? In one of three ways, decoding can be dominant, oppositional, or negotiated.
- **Dominant-hegemonic position:** the viewer is operating inside the dominant code.
- **Negotiated code:** a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic but also reserves the right to apply local conditions to the interpretation of the meanings.
- **Oppositional:** rejection of dominant message.
- There can be a dominant message... the “preferred meaning.”
- So, the message is a “structured polysemy” (meaning the existence of several meanings). But, all meanings do not exist equally in the message. There is a structure of dominance (explain). There is a preferred meaning (explain)

# Decoding Practice – *Archie Bunker*

"Whenever people ask me what kind of man I want my daughter to marry, I say I don't care. So long as she loves him and he's white"  
("The wit and wisdom of Archie Bunker," 1972).



<http://youtu.be/5c8eiCgRD3o>

# Decoding Archie

- Use of codes, what do we take as “natural?”
- Literal meanings versus implied meanings
- Barthes example of a sweater. Denotes “warm garment” Connotation “ winter is coming”
- “I’m no Mammy”
  - Literally = she is no Mammy.
  - Connotation = those days are over. Wake up and realize it’s the 1970’s!
- But, is that the only possible way to read that interaction?
- What might someone of another culture see?
- What might a racist – white power extremist see?
- Our decoding is likely “dominant” – in line w/ most people? No? But alternates are possible. This is part of the *interpretive work* that goes into watching television.
- Discussion: Are audiences able to decode at will? Are they constrained in any manner?

# Condit says...not so fast Mr. Hall!

- Argues audiences are **NOT** free to make their own decisions at will. They are constrained by several factors. (p. 103)
- (1989) Challenges some components of Hall's idea. Agrees in general that audiences are active and able to interpret texts, i.e -not passively accepting information from powerful media.
- But, does not think the process of decoding is as straightforward as Hall suggests. There are *other factors* as play in the process of decoding that must be considered.

# Condit

- Factors influencing decoding
  - Access to oppositional codes
  - The ratio between the work required and pleasure produced in decoding a text.
  - The repertoire of available texts
  - The historical occasion

# Condit – *Cagney and Lacey*

- Recruited 2 students. 1 pro-life and 1 pro-choice
- They submitted viewing notes and responses to questions.
- Less than 10% of replies between the two agreed w/ each other.
- Argues denotative understanding is similar. Both see and understand what happened the same way, but interpret it differently. They also understand how others with different political views would see it differently. She calls this “polyvalent.” Not that the text are read different. They are not, they see the same thing. But “responses” and interpretations” are different.

# Condit - Terms

- Polyvalence – the “fact” that audiences evaluate differently
- Intertextual polysemy – the existence of a variety of messages
- Internally polysemous – texts that have unstable or internally contradictory meanings

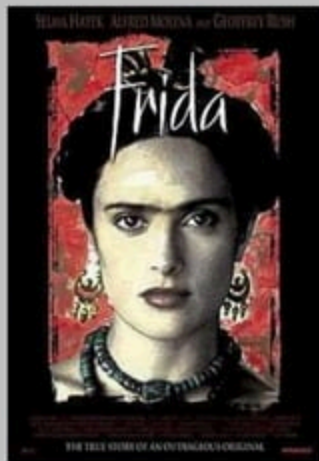
# Condit - Implications

- There is a difference in work-load for audiences. Dominant readings are less work than oppositional readings. This has 3 consequences:
  - Those with oppositional views can be silenced. Result: minority groups are silenced and discriminated against.
  - Need to study more to understand how oppositional readings may provide some pleasure, but overall less pleasure than dominant readings.
  - Access to codes make oppositional readings easier, but who is privileged to have access to them?

# Condit - Conclusions

- "In sum, television disseminates and legitimates, in a pleasurable fashion, a political vocabulary that favors certain interests and groups over others, even if by no other means than consolidating the dominant audience by giving presence to their codes"
- Need to judge a mass communication event based on its "resistance" to the dominant ideology
- Need to place less value on the text itself and more value on the work of audience to make meanings from it.
- Need to differentiate between what we take away personally and the collective implications

# Guzman: Decoding & Polyvalence



- Analyzes discourses of Latina/o identity. Investigates production and reception. Compares identity discourses promoted by the producers of the film and viewers
- Found:
  - “Discussions show how different communities negotiate the meanings of ethnic identity”
  - Latina/o identities are not a stable demographic category

# Analyzing News Discourse

- News:
  - Celebrates the movies notion of Mexicana/Latina ethnicity
  - Focuses on Hayek's status of Mexican ethnicity and connect her to Frida in that way.
  - Raises issue of conflict within Mexico about inauthentic representation. But, not occurring elsewhere.
  - Shows tension of news reporting between individual national identities and umbrella Latino/a larger community coverage.

# Analyzing Online Discourse

- Online:
  - “vex” the movies homogenizing tropes of Latinidad and open space for more hybrid view of Latino/a identity
  - Issue raised of “racial purity” – Hayek grandparent Lebanese
  - Issues of Economics / oppression, racialization
- Posters interpretations not only conflicting with news media but also with each other. Seems they are all pulling in personal issues – situated themselves in the discussion / reading of the movie. If they have dealt w/ an issue in their life, they are looking at movie from that perspective.
- Online discussion illustrates the “post-colonial struggle for recognition and legitimacy through representations” (p. 247)

# Acosta-Alzuru: Telenovela Decoding



- How did audience respond to *Cosita Rica*? Did they decode the metaphor of corporation as country? Did they interpret it as the writer intended?
- How did people respond to commentary on vanity?
- Key: People enjoy discussing shows and sharing their interpretations. Why?
- Link between communication and community. Enjoy talking w/ researcher, participating on message boards, etc...
- Do you think viewers level of involvement changes how they interpret the show?
- How does interaction w/ show seem similar/different in Venezuela vs. US?

# Conclusion - Overview

- Constructing and Negotiating Meaning: Audience Reception
- Encoding /Decoding
- Themes
  - Media's role in construction of viewer identity
  - Shift in power from media to viewers
  - Shift from content based to audience based studies
  - Shift from passive to active viewers

# References

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# Thank You

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