



MIXED RECEPTION
SOUTH AFRICAN YOUTH
AND THEIR EXPERIENCE OF
GLOBAL MEDIA

LARRY STRELITZ



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EDITED BY
LARRY KATZ

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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA
PRETORIA



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Abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress
CAD	Coloured Affairs Department
Contralesa	Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa
DET	Department of Education and Training
IBA	Independent Broadcasting Corporation
ICASA	Independent Communications Authority of South Africa
LSM	leisure standard measure
NP	National Party
NWICO	new world information and communication order
NYC	National Youth Committee
PAC	Pan-Africanist Congress
SAARF	South African Advertising Research Foundation
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SAIRR	South African Institute of Race Relations
TEFSA	Tertiary Education Fund of South Africa
UK	United Kingdom
US	Unites States of America

1. Introduction

If we hope to understand how people choose to express themselves in everyday life, we must come to terms with our own reasons for studying them.

T. Lindloff¹

On a personal note

This study stems from a few deeply etched experiences. The first is from the early 1970s. I'm 12 or 13 years old and I'm ironing a multicoloured, tie-dyed headband, which I've made from a strip of linen. This headband, slight as it is, is loaded with meaning because it signifies my identification with American counter-culture. When I put it on, it transports my young self to Haight-Ashbury, to a youth culture of communal living, sharing, personal freedom, drugs and sexual experimentation. This contrasts strongly with the reality – the isolation, conservatism and restriction of my life in a white, middle-class nuclear family in a small South African city.

I have no first-hand experience of the distant counter-culture I so want to be part of. In fact, my entire knowledge of it, or fantasy of it, is mass mediated. It comes to me through magazine images and through music, especially the music of the West Coast bands Grateful Dead, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and Jefferson Airplane whose songs celebrate counter-cultural values. Against these values I judge my own lived reality and find it hopelessly wanting. What has shaped the 'reality' I find so abhorrent? At the time it wasn't easy to know. But looking back, I can see it was shaped by local 'ideological state apparatuses' – the militaristic all-white, all-boys school I attended, the state-controlled radio I listened to, and the local newspaper I read. All of these institutions generated discourses that maintained the deeply conservative consensus of white South Africans under apartheid.

A second memory comes from the same period. It's late at night and I should be asleep, but instead I am tuning the short-wave dial on my radio, hoping to pick up a foreign station. By chance, I tune in to Radio Freedom,

the radio service of the African National Congress (ANC), broadcasting from Lusaka. The presenter condemns the 'racist white boers' who hold the reins of power in South Africa. I listen spellbound, finding the broadcast deeply unsettling. This is a voice from the margins I know nothing about. It is the voice of the black majority that is hidden from me, a voice silenced in the white-controlled media. It poses a threat to the 'white' reality I inhabit.

The third memory comes from many years later, when I am studying for a Master's degree at London University. It is my first time outside South Africa, and I find myself living in a university residence with a black South African exile, a member of the ANC who had been living in Tanzania since the Soweto uprisings of 1976. The ANC is still banned and its literature unavailable inside South Africa, but by now I consider myself politically well informed. However, I am taken by surprise at this young man's eloquence and the reasonableness of his political position. My response shows me how much my political understandings have been shaped by years of absorbing South Africa's mainstream media and their negative representation of black political movements.

These three incidents illustrate three different and contradictory roles played by the media in my life. In my identification with American counter-culture, it was the media that transported me (symbolically, at least) from the oppressive confines of my local culture to other worlds, giving me for the first time an external vantage point from which to make sense of my own life circumstances. At the same time, as the other two incidents show, my worldview was still trapped in the apartheid ideology sustained by the local media.

Audience power versus media power

In the 1980s, by then a lecturer in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University, I started reading the debates in contemporary media theory. I found that my earlier contradictory experiences of the media reflected the poles of 'audience power' versus 'media power', terms being used by theorists to explain the effects that media texts had on the cultural, political and economic lives of their audiences.

The argument for 'audience power' was largely informed by the qualitative audience research emerging from what came to be known as 'cultural studies'. This approach recognised that capitalist societies were divided along axes of class, race and gender, and assumed that those with social power, which included those who owned the media, would attempt to 'naturalise' cultural meanings to support their social and economic interests. These theorists did not limit their focus to media, institutions and the texts they produced, though. They also examined how people negotiated and used these texts in the course of giving meaning to their daily lives. Many of their research studies showed that subordinate groups would often resist the

ideologies promoted by media texts and, to varying degrees, produce textual readings that served their own interests.

On the other hand, political economists argued that the ability of audiences to make their own meanings from media texts made no difference. No matter how audiences responded, they said, the existing power relations remained in place. Furthermore, they argued, economic pressures on the media (e.g. their dependence on advertising) resulted in their producing meanings largely in keeping with existing power relations. The media complied by labelling as deviant, or simply ignoring, social understandings that fell outside of the mainstream. It was argued that meaningful opposition to the status quo was possible only when people had access to alternative social understandings. The limited audience freedom to oppose what was on offer should not be celebrated, they believed, because the important political work was the creation of a social reality in which there would be wider possibilities for the exercise of both economic and symbolic power.

I was faced with two approaches to the relationship between texts and audiences. The one emphasised bottom-up resistance to the media, the other, top-down media power. Academic journals were full of vitriolic attacks and counter-attacks between supporters of each position.

Globalisation of the media

In the 1990s, this debate was given new fuel by the rapid development of transnational media corporations that increasingly dominated the global media space. Media theorists generally agreed that these developments had cultural consequences, but there was little agreement as to what these consequences were. Your conclusion depended on whether you focused your analysis on institutions and texts or on audience reception. The media imperialism theorists, relying primarily on their analysis of institutions and texts, held that the increased control of media production and dissemination by a handful of Western powers and multinational corporations meant that we were witnessing the extension of Western (particularly American) culture. The result of this, they said, was the creation of global cultural homogenisation, which ultimately paved the way for the spread of Western economic interests.

A rather different set of conclusions was presented by the qualitative audience researchers. They argued that one could not predict solely on the basis of textual and institutional analysis what meanings *actual* audiences made of global media texts. Their audience research showed that global media played contradictory and unpredictable roles in the lives of local audiences. For example, global texts often played an important role in providing audiences with the symbolic means to critique their local cultural hierarchies. These studies concluded that it was not necessarily a good thing

to protect local cultures from the influence of global media, especially when aspects of local culture were politically regressive.

Focus of this book

'Youth' is a term that marks the transition from childhood, with its dependence on parents and other institutional authorities, to adulthood and independence. The media become a key resource for young people as they try to navigate this transition. This is partly because they have free time and partly because media use can be easily integrated into their daily lives. Given my research interest in media consumption and identity formation, young people seemed an ideal group to research. In South Africa, 43 per cent of the population are between 14 to 20 years and 73 per cent are under the age of 35. Despite this, most aspects of local youth remain remarkably underresearched. In particular, there is a complete absence of qualitative research examining the complex ways local and global media are incorporated into the everyday lives of young people.

I decided therefore to use students on the Grahamstown campus of Rhodes University as the subjects of this research. When I started this study in 1998, although the majority (55%) of students on campus was white, there were significant numbers of students from other 'race' groups. As a result of the availability of study loans to financially needy students from the Tertiary Education Fund of South Africa (TEFSA), the campus was home to students from a range of class backgrounds. I thus had access, in one space, to a cross-section of South African youth.

I was aware that these students did not represent the full range of South African youth and that this would raise the issue of the applicability of my research findings to the rest of the population. However, like most qualitative researchers facing this problem, I believed that the critical issue would be the cogency of my theoretical reasoning, couched in terms of generalisability of cases to theoretical propositions, rather than the population as a whole. I would use my findings among a particular set of youth groups to reflect on the debates within media studies concerning the relationship between texts and audiences, rather than trying to provide a comprehensive picture of media consumption patterns among South African youth.

Outline of this book

Chapter 2 explores the theoretical debates on the relationship between media texts and their audiences. These debates provide the framework against which my primary research data is discussed.

Chapter 3 extends this theme, putting the relationship of text and audience into the context of the contemporary economic and cultural processes of globalisation, keeping in mind the complex processes of interaction between

the spheres of culture, politics, technology and economy. Here I examine 'cultural globalisation' – the impact that the consumption of global media has on the cultural understandings of local consumers. The media imperialism thesis has played a key role in shaping the initial understandings of this process.

Chapter 4 outlines some of the main features of the South African sociopolitical context, particularly the impact that apartheid social policies have had on the lives of local young people. This chapter also locates my research within the context of local and international studies on youth media consumption.

Chapter 5 discusses my choice of research methods, outlining some of the main features of the qualitative and quantitative research approaches in the social sciences, and discusses the debates on their combined use in a single research design. I have included this chapter primarily for student readers of this book. In my own teaching, it has been helpful for students to see the relationship between theoretical research concerns and the way they are applied in a research design.

Chapter 6, drawing on focus group and individual in-depth interviews, examines how global media enable students to put a symbolic and imaginative distance between themselves and the conditions of their day-to-day lives. This distance provides them with insights into ways of life that differ significantly from their lived experience. I give some examples of the role played by Western media as 'carriers of modernity', pointing out how, in certain circumstances, the meanings they convey help to undermine local cultural relationships of domination and subordination, and generally widen the cultural horizons of local audiences.

Chapter 7 examines the uneven penetration of global media into local cultures. In many societies, there is a desire by the 'lower classes' for 'cultural proximity', which is translated into a preference for local media. This provides a counter to the media imperialism thesis, which presumes the total obliteration of local cultures by global media. In exploring this issue, I examine the media consumption practices of a group of local African students primarily from rural working-class and peasant backgrounds who socialise almost exclusively with one another. One sign of their separation from the rest of the campus is their choice to view television in isolation, in a specially created viewing room attached to one of the university residences, and to restrict their viewing solely to local productions. Yet their preference for local television was a recent phenomenon, coinciding with their entry to university. This allows me to question those theories that posit the centrality of media consumption to identity formation. I argue that the preferences of this group of students can be adequately explained only if the media are seen as mediating, rather than determining, their cultural experience.

Chapter 8 critiques the assumption, central to the media imperialism thesis, that before the American-led media/cultural invasion, Third World cultures

were largely untouched by outside influences. It argues that cultural encounters, often in conjunction with coercive political and military power, have been taking place for centuries. Interactions between these societies and globalised forms of electronic media represent only the latest such encounter. The chapter draws on theories of creolisation to make sense of these ongoing cultural encounters and provides local examples to support the argument. The chapter also examines the claim of the media imperialism thesis that global media provide a threat to 'national cultures'. Drawing on survey results and interviews, it demonstrates that far from there being a shared national culture among students, they are deeply divided along lines of 'race' and class, and that the global media they consume both reflect and help constitute them in this difference. The chapter also discusses one of the dominant explanatory discourses by which students explain their attraction to global or local media: 'realism'. It examines the 'empiricist' understanding of realism, which seeks a correspondence, at a denotative level, between the 'realities' internal and external to the text, arguing that a desire by many students for such a correspondence explains their preference for local productions. The chapter also points out that for other students it is, ironically, global rather than local productions that most adequately and accurately reflect their 'local' lives and that are therefore experienced as being 'realistic'.

2. Texts and audiences

It is a truism, but nonetheless true, that what you see depends on where you stand and in what direction you look.

G. Murdock¹

Audience autonomy versus textual determination

Ever since conservative mass culture critics in the late 1800s articulated their negative reactions to the related processes of industrialisation, urbanisation and the emergence of contemporary forms of mass media, theorists have been concerned with the relationship between texts and their audiences and with the effects of the media on their moral, political and economic lives.² The history of these debates oscillates essentially between theories that stress textual power over audiences and those that stress audience power over texts.

At the most general level, it can be argued that the different theories are due to differences about how to analyse the social formation as a whole.³ Thus Bennett, examining the way theorists have historically approached the mass media, argues that 'the sorts of assumptions made about the broader structure of society within different bodies of theory have determined both the sorts of questions that have been posed in relation to the media and the way in which those questions have been pursued'.⁴

For example, on the one hand, the Frankfurt School theorists' preoccupation with factors impeding radical social and economic transformation in Europe led them to focus on the role of the 'culture industries' as ideological apparatuses serving dominant societal interests. The social and political assumptions of Marxist materialism shaped their concerns and their theoretical approach. On the other hand, 'mainstream' American approaches, drawing on liberal pluralist political philosophy, have tended to take as given that value consensus is deeply embedded in society and therefore that the best the media can do is reflect that already-achieved consensus. Accordingly, for these theorists, media are short term and restricted.⁵ For the Frankfurt School theorists, the media are powerful instruments that aid the maintenance of class

oppression, while in the 'mainstream' American approach, they are seen as relatively weak, but important, instruments in the circulation and reinforcement of shared values.⁶

Another way of looking at competing approaches is to distinguish between those stressing the determining power of the media and those highlighting the interpretive freedom of audiences.⁷ The first position is represented by the 'effects' tradition that draws on a 'hypodermic' model of media influence. Theorists working within this tradition differ in their political perspectives and their focus on short-term behavioural changes or long-term cultural and ideological changes, but what they do share is the view that the media, as powerful social institutions, are able to 'inject' their audiences with their messages and thus affect their behaviour. In this tradition one can put theorists as diverse as the Frankfurt School, liberal pluralist theorists working within the behavioural effects tradition, critical theorists, political economy approaches to the media, and psychoanalytic theorists of text/audience relationships, best represented by what has come to be known as the British *Screen* tradition.

Opposing these approaches is one that stresses audience autonomy as opposed to textual determination. Again, a number of differences relate to underlying political philosophy. Whether it is 'uses-and-gratifications' research or the 'two-step-flow' approach, mainstream theories rooted in liberal pluralist philosophy have emphasised individual, psychological meanings rather than social ones.⁸ The limitation of this perspective is that differences of response or interpretation are attributed to individual differences of personality.⁹ On the other hand, cultural studies theorists supporting relative audience autonomy attempt to uncover clusters of readings that correspond to significant axes of power within particular social contexts.¹⁰

A third way of classifying the competing theories of text/audience relationships is to examine the 'moments' they emphasise in the 'circuit of culture'.¹¹ Johnson identifies four such moments in the circuit of cultural products production, texts, readings and lived cultures. He also identifies three main models of research: production-based studies, text-based studies and studies of lived cultures.¹² However, different theoretical approaches within media studies tend to focus on different moments in the circuit, conflating those moments with the meaning of the circuit as a whole. As Johnson observes:

Each approach has a rationality in relation to that moment it has closely in view, but is quite evidently inadequate, even 'ideological', as an account of the whole. Yet different approaches acquire an independence in the various theoretical paradigms, and are also related to the specialisms of academic disciplines.¹³

If we consider where the previously discussed approaches fit into the 'circuit of culture', it is clear that those theories that focus on media power in the

determination of meaning tend to cluster around the 'production' and 'text' moments of the circuit, while those which focus on interpretive freedom tend to cluster around the 'readings' and 'lived cultures' moments of the circuit. However, as du Gay et al. advise, 'rather than privileging one single phenomenon – such as the process of production in explaining the meaning that an artefact comes to possess . . . it is in a combination of processes – in their articulation that the beginnings of an explanation are to be found'.¹⁴ In attempting to get at the 'meaning' of a text, therefore, we need to acknowledge both the moments of production/text/distribution and audience/consumption/lived culture.

Cultural studies and political economy

Despite the recommendations of Johnson and du Gay et al. that we attend to all 'moments' of the circuit, this advice has rarely been heeded.¹⁵ One could argue that their different emphases on different 'moments' in the circuit of culture explains much of the theoretical divisions and hostilities between the cultural studies and political economy theorists. So deep has the animosity between the two approaches become that Kellner refers to the 'war' between them.¹⁶

Let me briefly outline these two opposing approaches to the study of media in society.

Cultural studies is a 'polymorphous tradition',¹⁷ and the 'ethnographic turn'¹⁸ within this approach is often signified as representing its main tendency.¹⁹ A key precursor to the focus on audiences, consumption and the accompanying 'turn' was Stuart Hall's essay 'Encoding/Decoding'. Originally circulated in 1973 as a working paper at the Birmingham Centre, it proposed an analytic separation of the encoding and decoding moments in textual production and reception. It argued that because the text has the power to propose or suggest particular ideological readings, the audience should be seen as active decoders who may or may not accept the positions being offered.

This understanding of text/audience relationships gave impetus to the emergence of ethnographic approaches to media consumption as well as a number of well-known works on youth subcultures.²⁰ Drawing on qualitative research methods (in-depth interviewing and/or participant observation), the aim was to provide detailed descriptions of how audiences negotiate and use media texts in the course of their everyday lives, constructing their own meanings within an autonomous cultural economy.²¹ Thus, against the emphasis of the critical paradigm on top-down power – a perspective that informs political economy – the ethnographic perspective emphasised bottom-up resistance as itself a form of subordinate power. The meanings around which this resistance was organised were obtained from the consumption of mass-produced popular cultural forms.

Media theorists informed by political economy have argued that the ethnographic emphasis on meaning-making at the point of consumption has resulted in an approach that downplays the structuration of experience via objective factors (e.g. class and organisational structure) which stand outside of audience subjectivity.²² As a result, they argue, cultural studies has often lapsed into a naïve humanism in which the power of the text (often replaced with the notion of ‘textuality’ and its implication of unlimited semic potential) is completely subordinated to the semiotic creativity of the consumer. In particular, political economists argue, the production and distribution of culture takes place within a specific economic system that, they say, places constraints on the range of textual meanings made available by the producing institutions.

For their part, cultural studies theorists argue that the reductionism and economism of some versions of political economy result in a failure to engage concretely with texts and audiences. Thus, while Garnham has argued that within cultural studies there ‘has been the overwhelming focus on cultural consumption rather than on cultural production’, Grossberg has replied that while too much work in cultural studies admittedly fails to take economics seriously enough, political economy fails to take culture seriously enough’.²³

I would argue that the ‘war’ between these two approaches is a false one. Along with an increasing number of other theorists, I believe that they present a false dichotomy and that it is more fruitful to combine insights from both.²⁴

To do this, we need to look into these approaches more deeply. A useful place to start is with Curran, who argues that while there were originally differences in emphasis between the two approaches – depending on whether they stressed economic or ideological reasons for the media’s subordination to dominant social interests – they both worked within a neo-Marxist model of society. Thus they both perceive a connection between economic interests and ideological representations, and both portray the media as serving dominant social interests.²⁵ Both Curran and Kellner attribute the rupture in this original unity to the ‘postmodern turn’ in cultural studies. According to Kellner, ‘economics, history, and politics are decentred in favour of emphasis on local pleasures, consumption, and the construction of hybrid identities from the material of the popular’.²⁶ Implied in this explanation is that political economy has still held onto the modernist project. While Kellner’s description of cultural studies may be objected to, I do believe that basic differences between postmodernist and modernist theorising go some way to explaining the differences.

What is modernist theory? Briefly stated, Morley argues that underlying the modernist project is a set of interrelated notions: ‘modernisation, rationalisation and progress, and an implicit vision of the gradual perfectibility of society, to be achieved by rational planning and social reform’.²⁷ Modernists, according to Berman, celebrate and identify with all

those activities – science, art, technology and politics – that enable mankind to ‘make all things new’. Berman points out how the modernist project demands deep and radical renewals: ‘modern men and women must become the subjects as well as the objects of modernisation; they must learn to change the world that is changing them, and to make it their own’.²⁸ Thus, underlying the modernist project are the aspirations of the Enlightenment – that one can define essential human nature, prescribe a particular destiny to human history and define collective human goals.²⁹ The modernists continue this philosophical orientation in their belief that one can discover the ‘truth’ behind the surface of appearances through totalising explanatory theories such as Marxism, psychoanalysis and structuralism. Modernist discourses claim it is possible to ‘know the truth of the human condition, or to speak in the name of abstract concepts of justice or society’.³⁰

Such claims are rejected by postmodernist theorists. They search for ‘local knowledges’ as opposed to truth; reject hierarchies of value; emphasise the active production (or ‘construction’) of meaning.³¹ Foucault’s stress on manifold relationships of power at play in different situations – relationships that cannot be traced to the mode of production or social formation – provided a key impetus to the postmodernist shift of focus within the cultural studies approach.³² Thus, Fiske has written that ‘one of the many debts we owe to Foucault is his insistence that power relations cannot be adequately explained by class relations, that power is discursive and is to be understood in the specific contexts of its exercise, not in generalised social structures.’³³ Zavarzadeh notes further that postmodern theories of resistance – evident in this strand of cultural studies – can be traced to Foucault’s insistence that power always activates counterpower (resistance): ‘Wherever there is power there is resistance’.³⁴

These assumptions lead to different ways of understanding text/audience relationships. The cultural studies approach, through ethnographic studies on media consumption, has increasingly focused on how different social groupings use the meanings circulated by the mainstream media to make sense of their lives and the specific class, gender, ‘race’ and other identities they inhabit. For them, ‘opposition’ takes place at the level of discourse. In line with Foucault, the stress is often on opposition, subjectivity, audience freedom, consumption and localised truths as ‘the people’ take on ‘the power bloc’.

In contrast, political economy, rooted in Marxist materialism, insists that however much power operates through discourse, it operates primarily through material relations. Political economy theorists stress the need to interrogate the interplay between the economic and the symbolic. They argue that it is the system of production that determines what sorts of cultural texts will be produced and the discursive limits of these texts. As Garnham writes:

A delimited social group, pursuing economic or political ends, determines which meanings circulate and which do not, which stories are told and about

what, which arguments are given prominence and what cultural resources are made available and to whom. The analysis of this process is vital to an understanding of the power relationships involved in culture and their relationship to wider structures of domination.³⁵

Cultural populism

It is ironic that Hall's encoding/decoding essay gave rise to the cultural populism approach to consumption within cultural studies. Ironic, because although critiquing the notion of an all-powerful media able to make people behave in certain ways through its notion of 'preferred readings', it still retained the notion of the media determining the frameworks and categories within which the culture tends to operate. Commenting on Hall's essay, Morley points out that while it had its shortcomings – for example, how one transfers the notion of preferred reading, initially applied to news and current affairs television, to the analysis of fictional television – it provided a middle ground between the notion of a text having a determinate meaning and the equally problematic notion of a text being completely 'open', upon which the reader projects his/her own meaning. Morley notes, 'The point of the preferred reading model was to insist that readers are, of course, engaged in productive work, but under determinate conditions. Those determinate conditions are of course supplied both by the text, the producing institutions and the social history of the audience'.³⁶

Despite this, audience ethnographies have, with a few exceptions, had very little to say about 'determinate conditions'. Morley admits that within cultural studies the model has been 'quite transformed' to the point 'where it is often maintained that the majority of audience members routinely modify or deflect any dominant ideology reflected in media content and the concept of a preferred reading, or of a structured polysemy, drops entirely from view'.³⁷ As McGuigan points out, once an attempt was made to reconcile the dominant ideology thesis (preferred reading) with the active audience, there was always the danger that the active audience concept would be considered a dominant factor.³⁸ Like Morley, McGuigan believes that this has actually happened, resulting in a drift within cultural studies into an uncritical, cultural populist position, with a narrow focus on interpretation and related uncritical celebration of popular readings at the expense of questions of power. He argues that this is the inevitable result of the commitment of cultural studies to a hermeneutic methodology at the expense of the perspective of political economy. Furthermore, he argues, the celebration of the consumer has led to a crisis of qualitative judgement whereby the value of cultural forms resides in their popularity, rather than any external criteria. In line with postmodern theorising, this leaves us with no Archimedean point from which we can make value judgements on the cultural forms under discussion – their value lies in their popularity.

Gitlin argues that a position that celebrates the consumer assumes 'that the people who render it popular are not misguided when they do so; not fooled; not dominated; not distracted; not passive . . . [rather] the premise is that popular culture is popular because and only because the people find in it channels of desire, pleasure, initiative, freedom'.³⁹ Jane Root, a British writer on popular television, exemplifies this approach: 'Rather than sitting like gawping zombies, viewers choose programmes. Banal as it may sound, people watch *Crossroads* and *Dallas* because they like them'.⁴⁰

Critics usually hold up the writings of John Fiske as exemplifying all that is 'wrong' about cultural studies' drift into uncritical populist politics.⁴¹ For this reason, and other reasons noted below, I wish briefly to look at Fiske's approach to the text/audience problematic. Firstly, his populist position arguably represents the dominant position in cultural studies (certainly as witnessed in the American appropriation of British cultural studies).⁴² Secondly, Fiske's work represents the audience freedom end of the continuum between textual determinism and audience freedom and consequently attracts condemnation or praise (sometimes both) from media and cultural theorists.⁴³ Examining Fiske's cultural populist tendency allows us to clarify what is at stake in theorising the politics of consumption, especially as it pertains to my own approach.

Theoretical approach of John Fiske

Fiske appears to draw on the neo-Marxist understanding of capitalist societies as divided societies, but his insistence on postmodern theorising results in a Marxism without the materialism. His reliance on de Certeau's and Foucault's stress on 'popular resistance' results in a reading of cultural consumption that stresses its inherently oppositional function. Fiske argues:

Everyday life is constituted by the practices of popular culture, and is characterised by the creativity of the weak in using the resources provided by a disempowering system while refusing finally to submit to that power. The culture of everyday life is best described through metaphors of struggle or antagonism: strategies opposed by tactics, the bourgeoisie by the proletariat; hegemony met by resistance, ideology countered or evaded; top-down power opposed by bottom-up power, social discipline faced with disorder.⁴⁴

Fiske rejects the view that the 'capitalist culture industries produce only an apparent variety of products whose variety is finally illusory because they all promote the same capitalist ideology', and related to this, that people are 'cultural dupes'.⁴⁵ In support of his position, he argues that the production and distribution of cultural commodities takes place in two parallel, semi-autonomous economies: the *financial* (where production is located) and the *cultural* (the symbolic exchange between texts and audiences). Separating the two economies allows Fiske to argue that 'the cultural commodity cannot

adequately be described in financial terms only: the circulation that is crucial to its popularity occurs in the parallel economy – the cultural. What is exchanged and circulated here is not wealth but meanings, pleasures, and social identities'.⁴⁶

This neat separation of the two economies enables Fiske to downplay any notion of economic determination of textual meaning. It also enables him to focus on reception as the locus of meaning. He argues that because it is not uniformly decoded by its audience, the notion of a concrete 'text' needs to be replaced by the more abstract notion of 'textuality'. Consequently, with regard to television viewing, he argues that 'what the set in the living-room delivers is "television", visual and aural signifiers that are potential provokers of meaning and pleasure. This potential is its textuality, which is mobilised differently in the variety of its moments of viewing'.⁴⁷ Being polysemic, argues Fiske, texts provide multiple potential meanings and pleasures. The polysemic potential of texts allied to the inherently oppositional stance of 'the people' in their cultural struggles against the 'power bloc', means that 'these popular forces transform the cultural commodity into a cultural resource, pluralise the meanings and pleasures it offers, evade or resist its disciplinary efforts, fracture its homogeneity and coherence, raid or poach on its terrain'.⁴⁸

Fiske's focus on the active audience enables him to re-theorise 'production' as part of 'consumption':

Every act of consumption is an act of cultural production, for consumption is always the production of meaning. At the point of sale the commodity exhausts its role in the distribution economy, but begins its work in the cultural. Detached from the strategies of capitalism, its work for the bosses completed, it becomes a resource for the culture of everyday life.⁴⁹

Ultimately, according to Fiske, while the cultural industries produce a repertoire of products, they cannot predict which of their commodities will be chosen by which sectors of the market to be the provoker of meanings and pleasures that serve their interests as well as those of the producer.⁵⁰

Theoretical gains and critiques

In Fiske's work, we clearly see how the focus on the reception moment in the circuit of culture is turned into the championing of a position that stresses audience interpretive freedom. What has been gained from this viewpoint? One could argue that Fiske, and the turn to ethnography in general, provides an important corrective to the ideological homogenising tendencies implicit in critical theory. At the same time, within this variant of cultural studies, there is the acknowledgement that capitalist societies are divided societies and that the making of meaning from textual consumption is deeply implicated in ongoing social struggle. Thus, while Fiske implicitly accepts the power of the forces of dominance, his focus is on the ways in which these forces are

resisted. The artefacts produced by the culture industries often provide the resources for this process of cultural resistance. Popular cultural consumption is accordingly an important site of ongoing social struggle in which dominant meanings are challenged by subordinate meanings.

Fiske provides a number of examples to support his position. For example, he quotes from Hodge and Tripp's study of the viewing, by Australian schoolchildren, of *Prisoner*, an American soap opera dealing with female prison inmates. Reading against the dominant ideological discourse encoded into the programme, the children were able to find significant parallels between the experiences of the prisoners and their own school experiences. The programme thus became a cultural resource for them in their attempt to resist the dominant cultural meanings that circulated within the school system. According to Fiske:

Prisoner provided Australian school students with a language, a set of cultural categories complete with connotations, value systems, and ideological inflection with which to think through their experience of school from their own position, to make a kind of sense of school that suited *their* social interests in that it enabled them to articulate their powerlessness and offered them a positive way of understanding it.⁵¹

In South Africa, the appropriation of American gangster styles evident in Hollywood movies by the *tsotsi* gangsters of the 1940s and 1950s provides another fascinating example of this process of using dominantly encoded texts for counter-hegemonic purposes. As members of an urban African criminal subculture, the *tsotsis* were identifiable by their speech, behaviour and dress, in particular the American 'city slicker' style comprising 'zoot-suits', long floppy coats and wide-brimmed hats. Reading 'against the grain', or what Hall refers to as 'oppositional decoding',⁵² was central to the *tsotsis'* viewing of the American gangster films. Anthony Sampson, a journalist at the time, provides a graphic description of watching the American gangster film, *Street with No Name*, at a 'non-European' cinema at which *tsotsis* made up the majority of the audience:

The lights dimmed, and the film began, with a sequence showing the FBI at work, and a personal message from Edgar Hoover, FBI chief, to say that crime does not pay. A tough police detective was preparing to smash a gang of killers. The *tsotsis* went on talking and shouting and cuddling their girl-friends in the dark. Occasionally they jeered at the FBI. A scene shifted to the gangster's hide out. A hush from the audience. Richard Widmark appeared in one corner. A shriek from the whole house. 'Stiles! Attaboy! Go it, Stiles!' A tense silence. Stiles wore a long overcoat, sniffed a Benzedrine inhaler, and occasionally bit an apple. Beside him slouched his henchman, wearing a belted raincoat with slits at the back. 'When this film first came out,' Can [Themba] whispered, 'the sales of Benzedrine rocketed. Everybody munched apples. All the *tsotsis* wore those raincoats'.⁵³

Following Fiske, one could argue that the *tsotsis*, through their identification with the styles, actions and attitudes of the filmic gangsters, inserted the meanings of the programme into their social experience as gangsters in a way that informed both – the meanings of being a *tsotsi* and the meanings of these films. Each was influenced by the other, and the fit between them ensured that each validated the other.

Ideology of pleasure

For Fiske, the obtaining of pleasure cannot be separated from resistance to structures of domination: 'pleasure requires a sense of control over meanings and an active participation in the cultural process'.⁵⁴ In a later work he writes: 'These antagonisms, these clashes of social interest . . . are motivated primarily by pleasure: the pleasure of producing one's own meanings of social experience and the pleasure of avoiding the social discipline of the power-bloc'.⁵⁵ Commenting on this aspect of Fiske's work, Dahlgren writes that 'the emphasis on the pleasure involved in sense-making draws attention to the fact that meaning making *per se* is not merely a rational/cognitive operation but also has an affective dimension. This can be seen as a corrective of the critical trajectory, which had for the most part been operating with a rather rationalistic psychology model'.⁵⁶ However, he goes on to warn against the tendency among some cultural studies theorists to celebrate resistance and pleasure *per se* without distinguishing between types of resistance and pleasure. In this regard, I would agree with Garnham, who argues:

Surely the aim should not be to bow down in ethnographic worship of these cultural practices, but to create a social reality in which there are wider possibilities for the exercise of both symbolic and (in my view more importantly) material power. Can we not admit that these are extremely constrained and impoverished cultural practices that contribute nothing to social change? We may wish to salute the courage and inventiveness shown in such circumstances, but at the same time wish to change them.⁵⁷

Furthermore, as Williamson points out, we should examine how personal needs feed into these pleasures without therefore necessarily assuming that they are a 'good thing'.⁵⁸ Gray takes this further, arguing that the often uncritical acceptance of the aesthetic preference and pleasures of viewers begs the question not only of their effect, but also their origins. Rather than taking these preferences and pleasures as a given, Gray writes, we should ask how these popular pleasures come about and what dimensions of the social structure they help to hold in place.⁵⁹

Two local examples illustrate the need to interrogate the politics of pleasure critically. The first concerns the *tsotsis*, mentioned above. While they may have represented, at one level, an alternative culture, their opposition to

dominant bourgeois norms was never translated into political action. They were, and remained, juvenile gangsters. As such, one could argue, they played no significant role in the transformation of the structures through which they lived their oppression (evidenced in poor education, high unemployment, migratory labour system, and so on). They were involved in the 'magical resolution' of structural contradictions, the term used by Cohen with regard to the post-war British youth subcultures.⁶⁰ 'Magical', because while they offered resistance at the symbolic level, their actions never addressed the social and political reasons for their felt oppression. Arguably they were 'coping with' rather than 'resisting' their daily lived oppression.⁶¹ This raises the issue of how much a variant interpretation of a text can constitute ideological resistance in any significant way.

The second local example concerns *kwaito*, the music that lies at the heart of contemporary township dance culture. Drawing heavily in both form and content on American rap music, *kwaito* gets heavy airplay from Youth FM (YFM), the fastest growing regional music station in the country. Because of massive local sales, and the obvious significance of this music to local black youth, *kwaito* has attracted much favourable media attention. Most of the media coverage either profiles the musicians or uncritically charts the sales success of this generically unique musical form. So popular is *kwaito* that the organisers of the South African music awards introduced, from 1999, a *kwaito* category.

With few exceptions, what has been missing from media discussions of *kwaito* has been the overwhelming misogyny evidenced in the lyrics. As one song typically attests, 'Di beerie di cheapile / le baba ba tletse / Bai kutlwa bufebe / ba batla lerete', which translates as 'The beer is cheap, the girls are feeling bitchy and want to be fucked'. 'Koko ke koko' are the entire lyrics of another *kwaito* song which, translated into English, is 'Pussy is pussy'. When we consider the context of reception – a country deeply rooted in patriarchy with the worst rape statistics in the world, with estimates at 99,7 per 100 000 inhabitants – we surely need to interrogate the kinds of pleasures that are gained from such music and the social relationships they help to hold in place.

It would be useful at this juncture to revisit the debate that took place within cultural studies in the 1980s – that between the culturalists and the structuralists – discussed in Hall's seminal 1981 essay, *Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms*.⁶² The culturalist focus on questions of culture, consciousness and experience, with its accent on agency, I would argue, is reflected in the approach we have been discussing thus far. In contrast, the structuralist focus on the structuring of experience via factors that stand outside our subjectivity seems to connect closely with the concerns of political economists. The structuralists assert that the categories, classifications and frameworks of a culture do not arise from experience, but rather that experience is their effect. This is reflected in Murdock's assertion that we need to move away from the expressive individualism that informs much of the work on audiences to 'a

more thorough engagement with the ways that meanings and identities are negotiated socially, and with the ways that these grounded processes are structured by wider economic and ideological formations'.⁶³

The strength of structuralism is, according to Hall, its stress on 'determinate conditions'. Not only does structuralism avoid the often naïve humanism of culturalism and its privileging of the category of 'experience', but at the centre of the analysis is the concept of ideology. As Hall argues:

It is difficult to conceive of a Cultural Studies thought within a Marxist paradigm which is innocent of the category of 'ideology'. Of course, culturalism constantly makes reference to this concept: but it does not in fact lie at the centre of its conceptual universe. The authenticating power and reference of 'experience' imposes a barrier between culturalism and a proper conception of 'ideology'.⁶⁴

I would contend that in analysing media consumption, we need to have recourse to the notion of ideology – 'meaning in the service of power'⁶⁵ – for without it, it is difficult to move beyond the level of description to theoretical abstraction. Thus, Murdock notes that the impulse to decode only in terms of opposition and resistance means that instances are often missed when interpretations and practices are taken over intact from the dominant culture. Rather, we need to interrogate what kinds of media frameworks are likely to be produced under different economic conditions, and what effects these frameworks and classifications are likely to have on audiences.⁶⁶

Murdock considers that Fiske is correct to argue that the polysemic nature of dominant cultural texts ensures their popularity by enabling them to connect with the lives and values of a variety of social groups. But, he adds, this argument ignores the ideological constraints that such programmes work within. For example, with regard to television broadcasting, he points out:

Whilst it is self-evidently the case that prime-time programming has to provide multiple points of pleasure for a socially differentiated audience, the formats it employs clearly operate to regulate the range of discourses and presentations called into play in important ways, preferring some whilst marginalizing or excluding others. As a consequence there are identities, experiences, and forms of knowledge which are consistently pushed to or off the edge of schedules. To argue otherwise is to accept commercial television's claim that it gives people what they want and need, and to undermine the case for new forms of public broadcasting that can address the full range of contemporary cultures.⁶⁷

Here we see the difference between Murdock's modernist stress on audiences as citizens requiring a full range of information in order to make informed political choices, and the postmodern tendency to view media primarily as a resource for the structuring of identity. While the modernist position places its trust in reason and in our ability to approach 'truth', the postmodernist position rejects these universalist claims, denying that we can 'know the truth

of the human condition, or speak in the name of abstract concepts of justice or society'.⁶⁸

Murdock's argument also points to the centrality of the economics of cultural production as a 'determinate condition' – after all, as business enterprises the primary aim of the commercial media is to make profits. This is done by selling audiences to advertisers.⁶⁹ One way of ensuring that a publication reaches the greatest number of readers/viewers is to remain within the confines of 'what everyone agrees': the consensus. Hall points out the consequences of this: 'In orienting themselves in "the consensus" and at the same time . . . operating on it in a formative fashion, the media become part and parcel of that dialectical process of the "production of consent" – shaping the consensus while reflecting it – which orientates them within the field of force of the dominant social interests represented within the state'.⁷⁰

There are numerous examples of such interplay between economics and ideology. Baker points to a current trend in the US for major advertisers to pressure magazines to keep their content within dominant normative bounds. He quotes from a letter sent by Chrysler Motor Corporation's advertising agency, PentaCom, to magazines requesting their written agreement to the following policy:

It is required that Chrysler Corporation be alerted in advance of any and all editorial content that encompasses sexual, political, social issues or any editorial that might be construed as provocative or offensive. Each and every issue that carries Chrysler advertising requires a written summary outlining major themes/articles appearing in upcoming issues.⁷¹

Closer to home, Berger, writing on the operation of the liberal press under apartheid, provides a local example of how economic pressures forced the mainstream media to work within the ideological confines of the dominant culture:

The liberal press operated in, and took its cues from, the prevailing white landscape. A handful of white editors rose above the conventional wisdom of the day. They 'opened an account' and they paid the price: exile for Donald Woods, loss of their jobs in the cases of Raymond Louw, Allister Sparks, and Tony Hurd. White journalists like these, who tried to lead the white readership market, rather than follow its prejudices and interests, also ran into falling circulation. The decline was not compensated for by black readers who failed to attract advertising revenue.⁷²

Yet another illuminating example of the interplay between economics and ideology is provided by Allen in his examination of soap operas, the staple of most television networks. In his discussion of the paradigmatic structure of the genre, he points to the overwhelming whiteness of the world they represent. He argues that the reason for this is the limited range of relationships open to soap opera characters: kinship and romantic and social categories that often overlap. To include minorities, soap operas would have

to embrace interracial romance, marriage and parentage as a community norm. Allen argues that the producers' desire not to offend large numbers of their target audience (white women) means that they prefer to stay within the confines of the hegemonic normative bounds, thus reflecting and reproducing these bounds.⁷³

Similarly, Gerbner et al., in discussing some of the conclusions of the Cultural Indicators Project started in 1967–1968, point to the cultural and ideological consequences that economic pressure has on American commercial television:

When many millions of dollars of revenue ride on a single ratings point, there are few degrees of freedom to indulge egos or yield to many other pressures. Competition for the largest possible audience at the least cost means striving for the broadest and most conventional appeals, blurring sharp conflicts, blending and balancing competing perspectives, and presenting divergent or deviant images as mostly to be shunned, feared, or suppressed.⁷⁴

These institutional pressures, the authors argue, enforce the cultivation of 'moderate' or 'middle-of-the-road' presentations and orientations. They note that a content analysis of prime time television indicates an overrepresentation of 'well-to-do white males in the prime of life' and conclude that television's general demography is more weighted towards the patterns of consumer spending than representing the US census.⁷⁵ Placing themselves squarely in the critical theory tradition, the authors stress that media representations have social consequences. The repetitive lessons we learn from television are likely to become the basis for a broader worldview, 'making television a significant source of general values, ideologies, and perspectives as well as specific assumptions, beliefs, and images'.⁷⁶ The authors quote from their studies, which show that among American audiences, long-term exposure to television violence cultivates the image of a relatively mean and dangerous world. In other words, the more you watch television violence, the meaner your world.

While I do not believe that audiences are 'dupes' totally at the mercy of an all-powerful media, I would accept Hall's assertion that the 'first great cultural function of the media' is the 'provision and selective construction of social knowledge'.⁷⁷ If the media provide frames on 'reality', this is not the result of some great conspiracy. Besides the logic and pressure of the market, journalists are inserted into a number of reinforcing discursive fields – sport, school, business, the military, and so on – from which they draw their social knowledge. The role of the South African mainstream 'white' media in both reflecting and reinforcing the already achieved white consensus was graphically highlighted when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) devoted part of its hearings to the role of the commercial media during apartheid. According to *Rhodes Journalism Review* editor, Anthea Garman, who attended the media hearings in 1997, the testimony of journalists from

the mainstream press showed how much they had unwittingly complied with the apartheid government in their reportage of the social and political 'reality' of apartheid. She notes that for the commercial English-language press, 'ideology was far more of a constraining force on white journalists' reporting than apartheid legislation'.⁷⁸

A further example in the mainstream mass circulation media shows how economic and ideological pressures can confine representations of sexuality within a narrow cultural range. Jhally in his documentary *Dreamworlds II: Desire, Sex, and Power in Music Video* explores the systematic representations of women in music videos. Jhally concludes that the stories told by music videos in commercial culture define women in objectified and dehumanised ways – as objects of the male gaze. He points out that 90 per cent of these videos are directed and written by men, and the videos thus reflect the sexual 'dreamworld' of these men. If they did not reflect the already-achieved ideological consensus pertaining to male and female sexuality, he argues, they would not attain the wide viewership that they do. What we should ask with regard to the representation of sexuality, not only in music videos but in other areas of commercial media culture, is 'whose stories about sexuality are not told, whose visions of the world do we not see, who is silenced in our culture?' Jhally is against censoring these images, claiming, ironically, that they exist as a result of censorship – the censor being not the government but the market, which ensures that only the voices of commercial and corporate interests are heard. Rather than limiting what imagery already exists, Jhally argues for more diversity of representation, more democratic access so that these particular fantasy images do not work their influence without other stories being told.⁷⁹

Following Williams's discussion of the Marxist notion of 'determination', it is important to see the relationship between the economic and the ideological realms in terms of 'setting limits, exerting pressures' rather than 'essentially prefigured, predicted and controlled by a pre-existing external force'.⁸⁰ Decoding takes place within ideological limits (Hall's 'preferred reading') primarily a result of the interplay between the symbolic and the economic, and this is largely ignored by those ethnographic approaches that collapse the production and consumption moments and thus celebrate resistance and opposition. It is one thing to decode aberrantly within the confines of what is presented on the screen or on the page, but quite another thing to be actively presented with different ways of understanding the world, different identifications, and discourses that fall outside the ideological limits of what everyone agrees to. Curran and Gurevitch, in their discussion of Marxist perspectives on the media, argue a similar point:

The media taken as a whole, relay interpretive frameworks consonant with the interests of the dominant classes, and media audiences, while sometimes negotiating and contesting these frameworks, lack ready access to alternative

meaning systems that would enable them to reject the definitions offered by the media in favor of oppositional definitions.⁸¹

Similarly, in his discussion of the relationship between power and ideology, Lukes asks whether or not it is

the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial.⁸²

Thus, I would argue, exposing students to the class analysis of Chilean society explored in *The Battle for Chile*, or some of the debates and films emerging from the African film movement, is an overtly political act quite different in substance to an aberrant decoding of the latest Hollywood blockbuster. Similarly, there is a vast difference between Madonna's appeals to young girls' desires to be sexy and thus 'important' and a sustained feminist critique of patriarchal culture. Pursuing this line and drawing on her own experience in adult education, Williamson writes that what has transformed the experience of generations of working-class people 'is not the perception that TV is fun, but the perception that there are radically different ways of thinking and explaining the everyday experience in which mass popular culture plays a major part'.⁸³

'Polymorphous tradition'

While I have thus far focused on what is arguably the 'dominant line' within the 'polymorphous tradition' of cultural studies, this should not blind us to some of the very real gains made in this area by theorists who are far more cautious in theorising the relationship between textual determination and audience autonomy.

If the central aim of reception ethnography is to understand the lived experiences of media consumers, then it has to engage with the situational contexts – primarily the everyday micro-settings of reception – within which the media are used and interpreted.⁸⁴ This growing recognition of the importance of the context of reception – as significant as the object of viewing – represents one of the most important advances in recent audience work.⁸⁵ Morley argues that, with regard to television viewing, this implies a recognition of the domestic context:

This perspective relocates television viewing within the overall context of domestic leisure. Given that television is a domestic medium it follows that the appropriate mode of analysis must take the unit of consumption of television as the family or household rather than the individual viewer. This is to situate

individual viewing within the household relations in which it operates, and to insist that individual viewing only makes sense inside this frame.⁸⁶

As Morley further argues, once we take into consideration the family context of viewing, we can no longer treat the viewer as a free or rational consumer. We have to consider issues of power that translate, in this context, into negotiations around programme choice, where age and gender power within the family need to be considered. This approach tries to get beyond the view that sees television as disruptive of family life. His focus is on the way in which television is used to construct 'occasions' around viewing, in which various types of interaction can be pursued. Thus, instead of trying to decide whether people *either* live in social relations *or* watch television, we need to consider how viewing is done *within* the social relations of the household.⁸⁷

Another important issue is the attraction of media genres to diverse 'taste publics'. Morley argues that translating our concerns from the encoding/decoding model to genre theory enables us to shift our focus away from dealing only with the overtly political dimensions of communication. This leads the researcher to deal with the relevance/irrelevance and comprehension/incomprehension dimensions of decoding rather than being concerned primarily with the acceptance or rejection of the ideological propositions contained in the text. Such a shift in focus forces us to start plotting the attraction of media genres to various categories of readers – to ask 'who likes what?' so as to uncover the organised diversity of public tastes.⁸⁸

Drawing on Bourdieu's work on the social structuration of taste, Morley stresses the need to see the diversity of tastes and cultural competencies as socially organised and patterned. For example, the competency required of the soap opera viewer is different from that of the current affairs viewer. The one needs to be familiar with the consequences of actions in the fictive domestic/familial sphere, the other needs competency in the codes of parliamentary democracy and economics. In the light of this, Morley argues for the need 'to establish the forms of interdiscursive connections which can account for the purchase of particular textual forms on particular categories of readers, under determinate socio-historical conditions'.⁸⁹ Moores notes in this regard that 'a theory of genre or an ethnography of taste sets out . . . to specify the interdiscursive articulations through which salience and pleasure are produced. To the "who likes what?" question, then, it adds a "why do they like it?"'⁹⁰

Across the great divide

Discussing the relative merits of the cultural studies and political economy approaches, Murdock points out:

Critical political economy is at its strongest in explaining who gets to speak to whom and what forms these symbiotic encounters take in the major spaces of

public culture. But cultural studies, at its best, has much of value to say about how the discourses and imagery are organised in complex and shifting patterns of meaning and how these meanings are reproduced, negotiated, and struggled over in the flow and flux of everyday life.⁹¹

The need to draw on the relative strengths of different approaches has been voiced by a number of leading media theorists. For example, Dahlgren, in rejecting the 'two extreme positions', has called for an approach that is sensitive to the determining power of structures (economic and ideological) and to the relative interpretive freedom of audiences. 'Thus', Dahlgren argues, 'we end up somewhere between these poles, where some mix of the specifics of the output and the interpretive practices of the media both have a bearing. We can assume that the balance between them will vary considerably between people, social circumstances and media output'.⁹²

Similarly, Ang, in defence of what she refers to as 'the ethnography of media audiences' calls for an approach that sees reception as an integral part of popular cultural practices that articulate both 'subjective' and 'objective', both 'micro' and 'macro' processes. Ang believes that reception analysis has been one of the most prominent developments in recent communications studies. She argues that it has shown how people actively and creatively make their own meanings and create their own culture, rather than passively absorb pre-given meanings imposed on them. Still, she admits that there has been a tendency in audience ethnographies to 'foreground the social-psychological moment of direct contact between media and audience members, and thus to isolate and reify that particular moment as the preferred instance that merits ethnographic examination'. In contrast to this tendency, Ang emphasises the importance of 'not reducing reception to an essentially psychological process' but rather of seeing it 'as a deeply politicised, cultural one'. She calls for a 'critical ethnography' that will uncover 'the unrecognised, unconscious and contradictory effectivity of the hegemonic within the popular, the relations of power that are inscribed within the texture of reception practices'.⁹³

Kellner has also called for an integration of the two broad approaches into a 'multiperspectival' cultural studies that 'aims at critique of domination and social transformation'. He feels that one of the reasons for the hostility of those in cultural studies towards political economy relates to the reductionism and economism of its versions and its reluctance to consider texts and audiences. He argues that the construction of media texts and their reception by audiences is shaped by the systems of media production and distribution, and for this reason we need to include the 'political economy of culture' in cultural analysis.⁹⁴

South African television gives us an instructive example in this regard. Local content programmes are seen by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) as essential for developing South Africa's national cultures and identities. However, the cost of local television production is approximately ten times higher than that of foreign

programmes. In 2004, the average local drama series cost the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) between R8 000 and R16 000 a minute as against R1 000 for the equivalent import.⁹⁵ Given these relatively high costs, it is unsurprising that, according to the SABC annual report for 2002/3, only 24 per cent of aired television dramas were locally produced. These cost restrictions apply to other television genres and are acknowledged by ICASA. In 2004, ICASA gazetted new local content quotas. For the public broadcasting services (SABC), the new overall quota was 55 per cent, for the commercial free-to-air service (e.tv) it was set at 35 per cent, while for the terrestrial subscription service (M-Net) it was 8 per cent. When these were announced, broadcasters immediately complained that even these quotas were too high.⁹⁶ Here we have an indication of how the ways of financing cultural production and distribution have consequences for what is circulated in the public domain. However, only ethnographic audience research can tell us the consequences for viewers.

I have argued that in attempting to understand the implications of audience consumption within a particular context, we need to consider issues of production, text and consumption. The study of media consumption brings together a number of related issues – those of pleasure, resistance, ‘structuration’ of experience, economic determinism, audience freedom, audience constraint – all of which, I would argue, need to be considered if a satisfactory approach to the study of the subject is to be achieved. I have argued against an uncritical valorisation of audience pleasures. These pleasures are produced, not innate, and they can often support and naturalise relations of domination. Ideology operates as much by absence as by presence, and there may be new pleasures – pleasures more related to understanding than identification – to be experienced by exposing audiences to ‘difference’ rather than ploughing the same well-worn furrows of the ideologically safe.

The writings of John B. Thompson represent, to my mind, one of the most satisfactory ways of uniting the culturalist emphasis on meaning-making with the structuralist emphasis on ideology and the structuration of experience. Central to his writings is his desire that ideology retain its critical importance and reformulate its content in the relationship between meaning and power. Thompson argues for what he refers to as a ‘critical conception’ of ideology. Rooting this approach within the concerns of critical theory, he claims that it ‘preserves the negative connotation which has been conveyed by the concept throughout most of its history and binds the analysis of ideology to the question of critique’.⁹⁷ Thompson proposes:

The concept of ideology can be used to refer to the ways in which meaning serves . . . to establish and sustain relations of power which are systematically asymmetrical . . . Ideology . . . is *meaning in the service of power*. Hence the study of ideology requires us to investigate the ways in which meaning is constructed and conveyed by symbolic forms of various kinds, from everyday

linguistic utterances to complex images and texts; it requires us to investigate the social contexts within which symbolic forms are employed and deployed; and it calls upon us to ask whether, and if so how, the meanings mobilized by symbolic forms serve, in specific contexts, to establish and sustain relations of domination.⁹⁸

While he acknowledges the difficulty of judging when a particular symbolic form is acting in the service of power, Thompson believes that 'domination' occurs when established relations of power are 'systematically asymmetrical', that is, 'when particular agents or groups of agents are endowed with power in a durable way which excludes, and to some significant degree remains inaccessible to, other agents or groups of agents, irrespective of the basis upon which such exclusion is carried out'.⁹⁹

Thompson puts forward a restricted definition of ideology.¹⁰⁰ Rather than thinking of ideology as 'built in' to media products themselves, his conception stresses the need to look concretely at the ways in which these products are understood and used by the individuals who receive them, and how the localised use of these products is interwoven with forms of power. He writes:

To study ideology, I propose, is to study the ways in which symbolic forms serve, in particular social-historical circumstances, to establish and sustain relations of domination. It follows from this conception that particular symbolic forms, or particular sets of ideas or belief systems are not ideological in and for themselves. One can determine whether particular symbolic forms are ideological only by analysing them *in situ*, in relation to the structured patterns of power which they may (or may not, as the case may be) help to establish and sustain.¹⁰¹

In other words, the social conditions of reception of the symbolic forms are as important in our analysis as are the properties of the forms themselves. This insight is at the centre of the media ethnography tradition, a tradition that insists that, according to the context of reception, particular forms may be ideological. It does not link ideology to truth or falsity, but rather to the relationship between symbolic forms and power. Again, this relationship can be analysed only within the context of the existing social relations of the consumers of the forms. Thus for Thompson, cultural analysis can be construed as 'the study of symbolic forms in relation to the historically specific and socially structured contexts and processes within which, and by means of which, these symbolic forms are produced, transmitted and received – in short, it is the study of the meaningful constitution and social contextualisation of symbolic forms'.¹⁰²

Conclusion

I have argued that ethnographic audience research, with its focus on how audiences create meaning out of items of popular culture, has provided an

important corrective to the textual and institutional reductionism of critical theory and political economy respectively. However, this corrective should not be taken to the opposite extreme. Critical theory and political economy correctly highlight, in my view, the fact that the range of those cultural products available to us in our process of meaning-making is largely circumscribed by macro-political and economic factors. These meanings tend to work within a narrow ideological range, helping to support existing social patterns of power. One of the best reconciliations of competing emphases of these theoretical approaches to text/audience relationships is the work of Thompson. While he still holds onto a critical theory of ideology (often missing from ethnographic research), he argues that symbolic forms are not ideological in and of themselves, but that they need to be analysed *in situ* in relation to structures of power that they may, or may not, help sustain. It is this kind of situational analysis that the assessment of text/audience relationships needs.

3. Media theory in the age of globalisation

Indeed after years of anti-apartheid sanctions South Africa is a country awash in American consumer goods, colonised by American pop culture, and obsessed with American celebrities.

B. Keller¹

If American popular culture seems so attractive to so many in the world, how do people incorporate it into their activities, fantasies, values and so on? What multifarious and contradictory meanings are attached to images of the 'American way of life' in what specific circumstances?

I. Ang²

The media are increasingly everywhere, but not everywhere in the same way.

I. Ang³

Introduction

As I concluded in the previous chapter, contemporary practices of media reception and consumption now occur within the changing context of the world media system. Ang writes:

The communications industries, as part of the ever expanding capitalist system, have been in the process of profound economic and institutional restructure and transformation, which can be characterised by accelerated transnationalisation and globalisation. We can see this in the emergence of truly global, decentered corporations in which diverse media products (film and television, press and publishing, music and video) are being combined and integrated into overarching communications empires such as those of Bertelsmann, Murdoch, Berlusconi and Time-Warner. This process is accompanied by an increased pressure towards the creation of transnational markets and transnational distribution systems (made possible by new communication technologies such as satellite and cable, transgressing established boundaries and subverting existing territories a process which, of course, has profound political and cultural consequences.⁴

As we saw in the previous chapter, there is a divide between theoretical positions that stress the determining power of texts over audiences and those

that affirm the ability of audiences to construct their own meanings from texts. In seeking a middle path between these two extremes, Ang argues that in this age of global media, 'there is no way to know in advance which strategies and tactics different people in the world will invent to negotiate with the intrusions of global forces in their lives'. She adds that we can only hope for 'provisional answers' informed by 'ethnographic sensitivity' on how the global is incorporated into the local.⁵ Ang's 'particularistic' approach remains alert to 'contextual specificities and contradictions' while at the same time displaying a sensitivity to 'the way in which the hegemonic and the popular interpenetrate one another'.⁶ Her approach to understanding the relationship between texts and their audiences, which is sensitive to both ideology and audience power, is not unlike Thompson's, discussed at the end of Chapter 2.

This broad approach, together with the insights of the previous chapter, provides the framework for this chapter, which examines the interface between global cultural forms and locally lived cultures.

Media and globalisation

A feature of communication in the modern world is that it takes place on a global scale, giving individuals instantaneous access to messages that originate from geographically distant sources. Thompson writes:

Distance has been eclipsed by proliferating networks of electronic communication. Individuals can interact with one another, or can act within frameworks of mediated quasi-interaction, even though they are situated, in terms of the practical contexts of their day-to-day lives, in different parts of the world.⁷

This 'reordering of time and space' by the electronic media is part of a broader set of processes, commonly described today as globalisation.⁸ Globalisation is not a new process, being an integral part of the history of capitalism as well as modernism and originating in the commercial expansion and conquest by European powers in the late fifteenth century.⁹ However, we need to keep in mind the uniqueness of the current phase of this process. McGrew writes:

While early phases of globalisation brought about the physical unification of the world, more recent phases have remade the world into a single global system in which previously distinct historical societies or civilisations have been thrust together . . . it defines a far more complex condition, one in which patterns of human interaction, interconnectedness, and awareness are reconstituting the world as a single social space.¹⁰

There are, of course, theoretical differences among writers on globalisation – Ferguson refers to 'the problem of meaning'¹¹ and Sreberny-Mohammadi

points to the 'contentious theoretical debates about its causes'.¹² However, there do seem to be certain agreed-upon key descriptors of the process. These include worldwide interconnections between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals;¹³ the compression of time and space,¹⁴ which helps to create complex relations between local involvements and interactions across distance;¹⁵ the loss of sovereignty of the nation-states that make up the modern world system;¹⁶ and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.¹⁷ Reflecting this underlying theme of 'inter-connectedness', Tomlinson writes that '[g]lobalisation refers to the rapidly developing and ever-densening networks of interconnections and interdependence that characterise modern social life'.¹⁸ Similarly, according to Giddens, globalisation refers to 'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa'.¹⁹

In assessing the impact of global media on local audiences, we need to keep in mind the complex processes of interaction between the spheres of culture, politics, technology and economy. However, I propose that for analytic purposes we treat these as distinct levels of analysis.²⁰ Tomlinson writes:

What I understand as the cultural dimension of globalisation, or 'cultural globalisation' for convenience, is the particular effects which these general social processes of time-space compression and distanciation have on that realm of practices and experiences in which people symbolically construct meaning. I do not suppose that this cultural realm is in practice separable from other social realms and certainly not from the political-economic. Nevertheless, to argue we have to make, albeit artificial, distinctions whilst not losing sight of the points at which processes and logics in other realms become significantly determining: for example, the point at which cultural experiences depend on material resource distribution. Given these caveats, we can talk of something called 'cultural globalisation'.²¹

In a period when we are witnessing the increasing commercialisation, deregulation, vertical integration and concentration of ownership of the media, the economic, political, cultural and technological impact of the global on the local – and the resultant local transformations – continues to divide social theorists writing on globalisation. But before discussing these theoretical disputes, let us briefly discuss some of the economic and technological trends indicative of media globalisation.

Technological and economic trends in media globalisation

Thompson, writing on the development of new technologies in the globalisation of communication in the late twentieth century, points to three interrelated developments. Firstly, the digitalisation of information combined with related electronic technologies has not only increased the ability to store and transmit information, but has also enabled convergence between the

different media. Secondly, the development of cable systems has provided the capacity for the increased transmission of electronically coded information. Finally, the increased use of satellites has provided the technical means for long-distance communication.²²

In conjunction with these changes in technology for the production, distribution and reception of media, important institutional changes have taken place within the global mediascape. The most obvious of these has been the consolidation of global media providers in the hands of an increasingly smaller number of largely American-based transnational conglomerates.²³ Accompanying this process of consolidation, and aided by the technological developments, has been the move towards transnational markets and distribution systems which cross national boundaries.²⁴

The defining feature of this trend has been, according to Herman and McChesney, the wave of mergers and acquisitions among global media institutions that accelerated during the 1990s. What is emerging is a tiered global media market. In the first tier are ten huge vertically integrated media conglomerates with annual sales in the US\$10–25 billion range. They include News Corporation, Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, Viacom and TCI. The second tier comprises approximately three dozen large media firms with annual sales in the \$2–10 billion range. Most of these firms have working agreements and/or joint ventures with one or more of the first-tier giants and with each other. Finally, there are the thousands of relatively small national and local firms that provide services to the large firms, whose prosperity is dependent in part upon the decisions of the large firms. The market situation is forcing all media firms to become big themselves or to link up with these huge, global, vertically integrated conglomerates. Such integration makes economic sense because it results in distinct cost savings through fuller utilisation of existing personnel, facilities and content resources. Accordingly, when a conglomerate such as NBC or News Corporation wishes to launch a new enterprise, it can draw upon its existing staff and resources, with low marginal costs.²⁵

Herman and McChesney identify a second source of profitability deriving from conglomeration and vertical integration: the exploitation of new opportunities for cross-selling, cross-promotion, and privileged access. As they observe in this regard, commercially successful films are those that lend themselves specifically to the complementary merchandising of products. The revenues so generated can be greater than total box office sales or video rentals. For example, *The Lion King* earned over \$300 million at the US box office, yet in total generated over \$1 billion in profits for the studio.

According to *The Economist*, this vertical integration model can be conceived as a wheel:

At the hub lies content creation. The spokes that spread out from it are the many different ways of exploiting the resulting brands: the movie studio, the

television networks, the music, the publishing, the merchandising, the theme parks, the Internet sites. Looked at this way, the distinction between manufacturing and distribution begins to blur, because the various ways of selling the brand also serve to enhance its value. So every 'Rugrats' video sells another toy, and every toy gets somebody else interested in the forthcoming movie. You are starting a virtuous circle.²⁶

Nearly all of the large conglomerates are based in North America, Western Europe, Australia or Japan, with very few based in Third World countries.²⁷ As Thompson observes, 'the development of communication conglomerates has led to the formation of large concentrations of economic and symbolic power which are privately owned and unevenly distributed, and which can deploy massive resources to pursue corporate objectives in the global arena'.²⁸

The South African media have not been exempt from these international trends. In 1994, Irish magnate Tony O'Reilly bought 35 per cent of the Argus newspaper company, this figure rising to 58 per cent in 1995. He renamed the company Independent Newspapers, and in 1999 bought out the last remaining Argus shareholders (24 per cent), with the reported value of his investment reaching R1,3 billion. He then proceeded to de-list the company in South Africa. In addition, O'Reilly took control of other newspapers: *The Cape Times*, *The Natal Mercury* and *The Pretoria News*.²⁹ As Berger notes, 'In terms of concentration, this foreign investment was not a positive development from the vantage point of pluralistic democracy, in that in Cape Town and Durban the same company now owns both morning and evening papers'.³⁰

Following O'Reilly's initiatives, the UK-based Pearson group bought half of *Business Day* and the *Financial Mail* from Times Media Limited. They later established, with Times Media Limited, a large new Internet publishing operation called I-Net Bridge. In 1998, 62 per cent of the *Mail and Guardian* was bought out by the UK-based *Guardian*, while the Swedish group Dagens Industri bought 24 per cent of the black-owned Mafube Publishing during this same period.³¹ The *Mail and Guardian* was later purchased by Zimbabwean media entrepreneur Trevor Ncube. Further investment from elsewhere in Africa arrived in 2003 when Nigerian publisher Nduka Obaigbena founded a South African version of his successful Nigerian daily, *This Day*.

In the field of television broadcasting, Time Warner holds a 20 per cent share in the recently established Midi group, which controls e.tv, South Africa's only independent, free-to-air television station.³² These changes to the South African media system show how local media systems have been integrated into the wider, international/global media system. They also show how media products (e.g. the *Cape Times* or e.tv) in local media markets have become part of the parent company's strategy in the wider global media market.

The coming to power of South Africa's democratically elected government in 1994 heralded the death of the 'alternative press', mainly as a result of the

drying up of the foreign funding so much in evidence during the final years of apartheid rule. *South*, *Vrye Weekblad* and *New Nation* died, as did their magazine counterparts such as *Work-in-Progress*. The Independent Media Diversity Trust, whose contributions from the mainstream South African media industry had come to an end, also ran short of print media funds from foreign sources.³³ These trends led one commentator on the South African media to refer to 'the irony of a press which is politically free, but commercially hamstrung, leading to a situation in which minority views are sidelined when not completely ignored'.³⁴

I have outlined some of the structural changes that have taken place in the realm of ownership and distribution of the global media conglomerates, especially as they pertain to the media in South Africa. Let us now look at the implications of these changes for meaning-making at the point of reception, which has set off a now highly contentious debate among media scholars.

Media/Cultural imperialism thesis

Let us begin by examining what has come to be known as the media imperialism or cultural imperialism thesis and the critiques of this thesis.³⁵ The reasons for proceeding in this manner will become clear.³⁶

The media imperialism thesis shaped much of the research in international communications in the 1970s and early 1980s and consequently provided the theoretical basis for the initial reception, among many scholars, of the process of cultural globalisation.³⁷ Within international communications theory, this approach evolved to deal with questions that earlier communication models generally ignored.³⁸ Where the earlier models perceived modern media as tools for development, the media imperialism approach, by placing the media in a transnational context, viewed them as an obstacle to meaningful socio-economic progress. The media imperialism approach can therefore be seen as a corollary to the dependency model of development.³⁹ In the media field, the media imperialism theory was one of the major conceptual reasons for the concern of the new world information and communication order (NWICO) with the flow of information between nations of the world.⁴⁰

In contrast to the earlier models of modernisation, which assumed a basic mutuality of interest between developed and Third World countries, the cultural imperialist thesis posits a conflictual model of the world system and presents a pessimistic view of Third World development. Its major conclusion is that the Third World countries occupy a subordinate position in the international economic and political system, understood as being structured primarily according to the needs of the developed countries.⁴¹ Developed countries, it is argued, maintain their dominant position and continue their own development at the expense of the developmental needs of the Third World. Thus, according to Fejes, 'the penetration of Third World countries

by multinational corporations, the political objectives and foreign aid policies of developed countries, the subordinate position of Third World countries in the international market and credit system, all are seen as aspects of the dependency phenomenon'.⁴²

The media imperialism position argues that the transnational media provide the necessary cultural context for the reception of developed countries' economic policies. As Schiller remarks, 'the media-cultural component in a developed, corporate economy supports the economic objectives of the decisive industrial-financial sectors (i.e. the creation and extension of the consumer society); the cultural and economic spheres are indivisible'.⁴³ The media are central to the general process of globalisation⁴⁴ – seen to play an 'overwhelming role' in the process of cultural imperialism – hence the cultural imperialism theorists' tendency to interchange the terms 'cultural' and 'media'.⁴⁵

Pointing to the centrality of the media to this process, Lemish et al. write: 'Media are often perceived as a central mechanism perpetuating globalisation. Media products originating in the Western world provide a Western perspective, being embedded in Western value systems and cultural tastes that often serve Western economic and political interests'.⁴⁶ Outlining the main tenets of this approach, Tomlinson writes that 'globalised culture is the enforced installation, world-wide, of one particular culture, born out of one particular, privileged historical experience. It is, in short, simply the global extension of *Western* culture'.⁴⁷ Underpinning this argument is the claim that 'a form of domination exists in the modern world, not just in the political and economic spheres but also over those practices by which collectivities make sense of their lives'.⁴⁸

A central tenet of the media imperialism thesis is that media globalisation results in global cultural homogenisation. According to Hamelink, 'One conclusion still seems unanimously shared: the impressive variety of the world's cultural systems is waning due to a process of 'cultural synchronisation' that is without historic precedent'.⁴⁹ Summarising this claim, Lemish et al. write: 'Globalisation has been perceived as a form of Western ethnocentric and patronising cultural imperialism, which invades local cultures and lifestyles, deepens the insecurities in indigenous identities and contributes to the erosion of national cultures and historical traditions'.⁵⁰

These core themes are found in the writings of Herbert I. Schiller, the theorist most often identified with the view that globalisation is an expression of American cultural imperialism. It is useful to outline some of his main theoretical claims and concerns – assessing their strengths and weaknesses enables us to focus on some of the key issues relating to the impact of global media on local audiences. According to Schiller, the context for the development of 'media-cultural imperialism'⁵¹ is the *world* system – the modern world capitalist economy – with its single market organised by the global market imperatives of the American and the West European-

controlled multinational corporations. The character of production is determined in the core of that market (primarily the US) and radiates outwards. Central to this system are multinational corporations, largely American owned, which dominate the market in the production and distribution of goods and services, including 'communication-cultural' outputs.⁵² These outputs are largely determined by the same market imperatives that govern the overall system's production of goods and services. Importantly, we find a 'largely one-directional flow of information from core to periphery'.⁵³ The role of these communication-cultural outputs is not only informational but also ideological in that the outputs promote and develop popular support for the values and artefacts of the capitalist system.

In his more recent writings, Schiller has argued:

Media-cultural imperialism is a subset of the *general* system of imperialism. It is not freestanding; the media-cultural component in a developed, corporate economy supports the economic objectives of the decisive industrial-financial sectors (i.e. the creation and extension of the consumer society); the cultural and economic spheres are indivisible. Cultural, no less than automobile, production has its political economy. Consequently, what is regarded as cultural output also is ideological and profit-serving to the system at large. Finally, in its latest mode of operation, in the late twentieth century, the corporate economy is increasingly dependent on the media-cultural sector.⁵⁴

So, according to Schiller, while it is the commercial imperative that provides the impetus for the dissemination of Western cultural forms around the world, 'the impact inevitably is felt throughout the realm of individual and social consciousness in the penetrated provinces'.⁵⁵ Central to this penetrative ideological process are the mass media and, more specifically, the commercial mass media. For, as Schiller argues, a series of economic imperatives ensure that the broadcast media everywhere will carry the cultural material produced in the core areas – the US, Britain, Germany and a few other centres. Everywhere, the content and style of local programming will bear the ideological imprint of the main centres of the capitalist world economy.⁵⁶

The result of this, as was noted earlier, is '*the cultural and ideological homogenisation of the world*', which is not pursued by a single nation but by an integrated *system* of different national sectors committed to capitalistic economic organisation. 'In this sense', writes Schiller, 'the concept of cultural imperialism today best describes the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system'. Thus, according to Schiller, 'it is the imagery and cultural perspectives of this ruling sector in the centre that shape and structure consciousness throughout the system at large'.⁵⁷

Schiller also points to the role played by transnational corporations in breaking down national broadcasting and telecommunications entities so

that they can saturate the defenceless cultural space of the nation. The result is that 'as the trans-national corporate order grows stronger, in large part with the assistance of deregulated private information networks, it usurps and corrupts cultural expression and information diversity globally'.⁵⁸ In his more recent writing, Schiller argues that the corporate media-cultural industries have expanded remarkably in recent decades and now occupy most of the global social space:

For this reason alone, cultural domination today cannot be measured by a simple index of exposure to American television programming. The cultural submersion now includes the English language itself, shopping in American-styled malls, going to theme parks (of which Disney is the foremost but not exclusive example), listening to the music of internationally publicized performers, watching Cable News Network in scores of foreign locales, reading translations of commercial best sellers, and eating in franchised fast-food restaurants around the world.⁵⁹

To end this description of the main tenets of the media imperialism thesis, let me briefly introduce another important theorist within this tradition, namely Oliver Boyd-Barrett. In an influential essay, Boyd-Barrett defines media imperialism as 'the process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any one country are singly or together subject to substantial external pressures from the media interests of any other country or countries without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected'.⁶⁰ Boyd-Barrett lists the US as the dominant source country, followed by Britain, France, West Germany and Russia. He points out that 'the country which is affected by a media influence either *adopts* this influence as a deliberate commercial or political strategy, or simply *absorbs* this influence unreflectively as the result of contact'.⁶¹ According to Boyd-Barrett, the absence of reciprocation of media influence by the affected country 'combines both the element of cultural invasion by another power and the element of imbalances of power resources between the countries concerned'.⁶²

To sum up the media imperialism thesis: Cultural homogenisation results from the global circulation of Western media, which is something to be deplored; and local audiences are, against their best interests, powerless to stop this process. In the next section, I discuss some of the theoretical objections to these claims.

Critiques of the media imperialism thesis

Old and new forms of global economic and cultural power

A number of theorists have pointed to the need to distinguish between old and newer forms of global economic and cultural power.⁶³ For example, Hannerz contrasts the cultural power of the West during the period of imperial expansion from the seventeenth century onwards with the 'soft' cultural

imperialism of contemporary globalisation.⁶⁴ Drawing on the writings of Giddens and Bauman, he writes that although the process of 'globalising modernity' may have begun as an extension of Western institutions, these institutions' very global ubiquity now represents a decline in the differentials between the West and the rest of the world. In the early phase of globalisation, the West had pretensions to universalism (based on the project of enlightenment rationalism), while in the late phase no such pretensions exist. Thus he writes that 'the globalisation of the West's cultural practices is now simply occurring without any real sense that this is part of its collective project or "mission", or that these practices are, indeed, the tokens of an ideal human civilization. Early globalisation involves the self-conscious cultural project of universality, whilst late globalisation – globality – is mere ubiquity'.⁶⁵

Similarly, Ang argues that culture under global capitalism should not be seen as a centralising process that ensures a 'common culture', but rather as a 'decentralised, self-perpetuating mechanism that operates through an endless proliferation of choice insistently put on offer by the market forces of an increasingly global, disorganised capitalism'.⁶⁶

Glocalisation

Robertson provides another important critique of the 'myth' of cultural homogenisation central to the media-cultural imperialism thesis by introducing the Japanese business term 'glocalisation'. Robertson defines glocalisation as the 'tailoring and advertising of goods and services on a global or near-global basis to increasingly differentiated local and particular markets'.⁶⁷ These differentiated markets do not exist in and of themselves, but are generated through the process of micro-marketing. So, rather than aiming at homogenisation, glocalisation constructs socially differentiated consumers. Like Ang, Robertson argues that from the point of view of consumers, the array of cultural commodities on offer provide rich resources for cultural capital formation.

However, while the spread of uniform 'world brands' has been one of the main factors linking the threat of homogenisation to the spread of capitalism, this remains an ideal for multinational capitalism rather than an achieved end.⁶⁸ Marketers consider the 'cultural defences' of their target market and adopt appropriate strategies to penetrate these markets:

Indeed an awareness of cultural differences may become decisive in oligopolistic markets of the kind which transnational consumer goods manufacturers have already created in many countries of the world. As one economist points out, 'When global competition is driven by scale economies, at a certain point everyone gets equalised . . . the competitive advantage will go to the companies that are sensitive to individual market developments' . . . Accordingly we find very few products which are true world brands, 'manufactured, packaged and positioned in roughly the same manner worldwide, regardless of individual economies, cultures and life styles'.⁶⁹

Accordingly, Tomlinson notes, '[t]he logic of capitalist competition may therefore point to other cultural outcomes than homogenisation in the crudest form'.⁷⁰

One of the ways the process of glocalisation takes place is via the insertion of the messages of advertisements into the connotational strings that make up the stocks of knowledge that constitute 'national cultural identity'.⁷¹ In South Africa, the advertising of Coca-Cola is a good example. The *Sunday Times* of 15 October 2000 reported that 'the brief bout of competition between Coca-Cola and Pepsi Cola a few years ago inspired a splash of refreshing advertisements that drew from the rich culture of townships'. The article quotes Coca-Cola's client service director as saying that the qualities of the brand were like those of a 'trusted friend', whom local consumers would recognise and identify with. Tapping into folklore and tales of local heroes was crucial to this advertising strategy. It led to Coca-Cola's involvement in the annual Godfrey Moloï soccer event in Soweto around Christmas time – held in honour of Moloï, one of Soweto's entrepreneurial heroes. According to the spokesperson, the latest advert is designed to capture the *seriti* (community respect) bestowed on the thousands of urban and rural entrepreneurs in South Africa: 'The creative work features the realisation of an African boy's dream of owning his own business selling Coca-Cola products, so that one day he can fend for his family and also create jobs and become a man of honour in his community'. One of the advertising executives is quoted as saying that the challenge to marketers is to localise international brands like Coca-Cola via a unique understanding of South African behaviour, and that one of the ways they try to achieve this is by employing a diversity of staff. Coca-Cola, in this instance, has become glocalised – as much a local as a global product.

As Massey writes, in a discussion of global brands: 'Even the "global products" . . . penetrate different national markets in different ways. Their globality, and the consequent ability of companies to produce them on a mass scale, comes from their finding different niche-markets in all corners of the earth'. She concludes, 'globalisation can in no way be equated with homogenisation'.⁷²

Ethnographic critique

In their introduction to *Media Cultures: Reappraising Transnational Media*, editors Skovmand and Schroder argue that the 'general drift' of media research over the past 20 years 'has been to take popular cultural forms more seriously and, more specifically, to examine what popular audiences are doing with the cultural products that they consume in their everyday lives'. They further note that 'the basic premise [of this approach] has been to try and understand popular cultural practices as meaningful activities: as part of

people's ongoing attempts to make sense of their lives and the specific class, gender, race, and other identities they inhabit'.⁷³

Thompson also focuses on the ongoing subjective 'use' of media products by consumers to critique the media imperialism thesis. According to Thompson, the thesis 'fails to take account of the fact that the reception and appropriation of cultural phenomena are fundamentally hermeneutical processes in which individuals draw on material and symbolic resources available to them, as well as on the interpretative assistance offered by those with whom they interact in their day-to-day lives, in order to make sense of the messages they receive and to find some way of relating to them'.⁷⁴ These observations are part of what Moores has referred to as 'the ethnographic "turn"'⁷⁵ and Murdock as 'the "turn" towards interpretation'⁷⁶ in media studies.

Fiske also offers a definition of media ethnography which underpins much of his work on media consumption as discussed in Chapter 2. Fiske writes with regard to television viewing:

The object of ethnographic study is the way that people live their culture. Its value for us lies in its shift of emphasis away from the textual and ideological construction of the subject to socially and historically situated people. It reminds us that actual people in actual situations watch and enjoy actual television programmes. It acknowledges the differences between people despite their social construction, and pluralizes the meanings and pleasures that they find in television. It thus contradicts theories that stress the singularity of television's meanings and its reading subjects. It enables us to account for diversity both within the social formation and within the processes of culture.⁷⁷

Texts contain plural meanings and pleasures, according to Fiske, because they are polysemic. Meaning is no longer a privilege of the text alone, but arises out of the interaction between the text and socially situated viewers so that reception is the locus of meaning.⁷⁸ At the same time, our subjectivity is composed, Fiske writes, of the different discourses that we use to make sense of the domains that make up our social experience. However, because our social experience varies so much, our subjectivity comprises highly contradictory ideologies and discourses. We need, therefore, to see our subjectivity 'as disunited, as a site of struggle, not as a unified site of ideological reconciliation'. These different discourses, already in place as a result of our social situatedness, are brought to the text as we decode it.⁷⁹

According to youth researcher Bo Reimer, a central insight emerging from ethnographic research into media consumption is that while the media play a crucial role in young people's lives, what they have on offer is of an ambivalent character: 'It cannot possibly be reduced to any one single common denominator, and, depending on social situation, the same material can be used and interpreted in several different ways'.⁸⁰

Commenting on research by Hodge and Tripp on the multiple readings by Australian schoolchildren of *Prisoner*, an American soap opera dealing with prison inmates, Fiske writes:

They did not ask what effect television has on its audience, nor what use does the audience make of television; rather they asked how a particular television text, seen as a polysemic potential of meanings, connects with the social life of the viewer or group of viewers. They were concerned with how a television text is read, with how meanings are made by the active reading of an audience, and how this activity can be explained in terms of a theory of culture, that is, the process of making common sense out of social experience.⁸¹

All these arguments that textual meaning resides at the interface between socially situated viewers, already constructed in discourse, and polysemic media texts present a serious challenge to the media imperialism thesis, premised as it is on the singularity of encoded textual meanings. While the media imperialism thesis is strong on the production, distribution and content of global media, it remains notably silent on the reception of texts by local audiences. The conflation of the 'moments' of production and reception has been the weakness of many Marxist theories of the media, wedded as they are to their belief in textual determinism. To the extent that the media-cultural imperialism thesis discussed above has been informed by Marxist theory (and in particular by Marxist theories of social reproduction and 'false' consciousness), it too suffers from this theoretical lacuna. Thus, while the theory of media-cultural imperialism sounds plausible at face value, it has rarely been tested empirically.⁸²

The research that gave rise to this book was an investigation into how mass-mediated popular cultural forms are consumed by local audiences. My theoretical direction is best expressed by Moores:

In attending to the meanings produced by social subjects and to the daily activities they perform, qualitative audience researchers have frequently sought to explain those significances and practices by locating them in relation to broader frameworks of interpretation and to structures of power and inequality. This is the mark [of] a 'critical' ethnography. It is an approach which takes extremely seriously the interpretations of the media constructed by consumers in their everyday routines. At the same time, it is not afraid to interrogate and situate their spoken accounts.⁸³

The call by Moores for a 'critical' ethnography reflects Murdock's earlier call for us to move away from the expressive individualism that informs much of the work on audiences to 'a more thorough engagement with the ways that meanings and identities are negotiated socially, and with the ways that these grounded processes are structured by wider economic and ideological formations'.⁸⁴ It is with these ideas in mind that I set about investigating how South African youth consume global media products.