The Conscious Practitioner

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LO1 - Media Messages and Audiences

Cultural perspectives, values, beliefs and identities completely shape the way different forms of media are encoded and decoded. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (Hall, S. 1973) explains how producers and authors create media around their own religious and cultural beliefs and encode messages and meaning into their work. Meanwhile, the audience decodes what the creator has made and forms their own meaning, or arrives at the meaning intended by the author. The meaning decoded by the audience is influenced by the factors stated previously. Within Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, there are three different ways of interpreting media: preferred/dominant, oppositional, and negotiated reading. Preferred reading is the way the producer wants the audience to interpret their work. Oppositional reading is when teh audience completely rejects the preferred reading that the author is trying to convey and created their own meaning. The third way is negotiated reading, which is an in-between position where the reader accepts the preferred reading but also holds their own views.

For example, Call of Duty Modern Warfare (Call Of Duty Modern Warfare, 2019) contains encoded messages surrounding the ideas of patriotism, the morals of war and national security, as well as certain political and cultural perspectives centered around the western military. There are many different decoded perspectives on this game. One of the main ones comes from people who connect with the message the developers intended and who see that game as a realistic portrayal of modern combat and a celebration of soldiers' sacrifices (The preferred/negotiated reading). The opposing view, primarily held in countries portrayed as the antagonists within the game, is that it acts as political propaganda.

Another example is the popular Netflix series Squid Game (Squid Game, 2021). This show discusses many dystopian aspects of modern society, to the point where the main message the director intended can become lost among the different interpretations. The preferred message encoded into the show concerns Korean social hierarchies, economic inequality and collective trauma. As discussed by John Feffer (Feffer, 2021) "Household debt in South Korea is over 100 percent of the country's GDP. Housing is expensive while secure jobs are scarce. A few years ago, young people started referring to their country as Hell Chosun, a place where they simply couldn't get ahead." This is clearly demonstrated in the show, as 456 people choose to risk their lives to pay off their debt rather than return home empty-handed to the lives they were living before. Even when offered the chance to leave after learning the risks involved, they still continue to play. Although this aspect is not what many viewers focus on, it truly showcases how dystopian life in South Korea can be. Issues of social hierarchy are highlighted further when the audience discovers that the game exists solely to entertain the wealthy. The lives of the players mean nothing to them simply because they lack money; their deaths do not matter as long as the rich are satisfied.

The negotiated interpretation of the show's message is similar to the preferred meaning, but viewers apply it to issues within their own countries. Brazilian viewers might link Squid Game to their nation's problems with poverty and political corruption, whereas British viewers may relate it to the UK's rising cost-of-living crisis and class divides. The oppositional view, however, argues that the show is overly critical of the topics it explores, with some even interpreting it as anti-capitalist propaganda.

I believe that interpreting media is just as important as creating it when it comes to understanding its impact. Releasing a piece of media without considering the cultural impact it may have, or the negative interpretations that could arise when decoding it, may result in the work being perceived more negatively

than the message originally intended. However, if a creator considers the different ways their work could be decoded, they can adjust it to more effectively communicate the intended encoded message and avoid unintentionally producing a negative one.

LO2 - Fandom and Fan Cultures

It is definitely true that fan-created media challenges normative attitudes towards issues of gender, sexuality, race and cultural taste by creating media that represents a more progressive, diverse and inclusive approach towards the franchise that the media is based on. This topic is discussed in the book Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture written by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, 1992). This book focuses on challenging the stereotype of fans as passive consumers and instead portraying them as "textual poachers" who reinterpret and create new meaning from popular media. He shows how fans resist corporate control by producing fan fiction, art and other creative works. The book also highlights how fandom subverts dominant norms around gender, sexuality, race, and cultural taste, and argues that fans transform the consumption experience into a form of meaningful production and cultural critique.

"Fan fiction is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk." Henry Jenkins believes that fans are "repairing" a story that they deem broken and mishandled by the corporation who made it. Fans use fan fiction to free the work from the minds of the corporations and instead alter the stories, themes, and characters that they feel need to be changed or fixed. Jenkins also says that it is the folk vs the corporations and the damage that the corporations have done to their own work. The damage that he is referring to is the restrictions placed on companies and their work. While companies have to think about the legal and cultural powers and restrictions that affect their work, fans can do whatever they want with the work without the worry of restrictions holding them down.

A game that has a high number of fan fictions and art that make the game more progressive and inclusive is Overwatch (Overwatch, 2016). Overwatch is already a very progressive, diverse and inclusive game with character originating from all over the world and with all different sexualities. Examples of characters with a diverse range of nationalities includes: Lucio who is brazilian, Genji who is Japanese, Tracer who is British, Zarya who is Russian, and D.Va who is Korean. Examples of character with a diverse range of sexualities includes: Lifeweaver who is pansexual, Soldier:76 who is gay, Sombra who is bisexual, Pharah who is lesbian, and Symmetra who is asexual. Even with the game being so diverse, fans still continue to make the game even more inclusive by altering characters and their story to what feels right to them. One of the best websites to read Overwatch fan fictions is Wattpad (Overwatch Stories - Wattpad, s.d.). After reading some stories, I can say that fans who write fan fictions can do a great job of altering stories and characters while still making them work. A lot of stories that are on there and very inclusive and change the sexualities of characters to tell a different story. A lot of fan fictions that I came across altered the sexuality of Mcree/Cassidy from a straight male to a gay male to tell a romance story that the fan wants to tell for that character. A fan fiction I also came across alters the sexuality of Mercy to be a lesbian woman so that a story could be told of her relationship with Pharah.

From reading and researching fan fictions, I can definitely say that I agree that fans repair and alter stories to challenge normative attitudes towards issues of gender, sexuality, race and cultural taste. Not just this but fan fictions also make the story of different types of media even more interesting to read into, even though they aren't cannon to the story.

LO3 - Module Summary

This module has opened my eyes to how important it is to think of my audience while working on media. My audience are the people who can interpret my work in different ways, make it popular and alter it with fan art and fiction, bring it up with a positive reception of the game or bring it down with a negative reception if it doesn't fit their personal beliefs. Understanding the audience's diverse expectations and reactions will help me create more inclusive and diverse content. It also has highlighted the power audiences have in shaping the success or failure of media through their interpretations and interactions, reinforcing the need to consider their perspectives and cultural context throughout the creative process.

Bibliography

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