Using French Social Thought for Media Criticism

Contents

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1 MEDIA CULTURE

In an era when the media have grown to be one of the most dominant forms of culture in North American – so dominant, in fact, that the they can now be seen as the pinnacle of commercial culture – an explanatory theory of the media becomes paramount. Yet considering the intimate relationship between society and media and that, for many, the media have become their culture – producing a media culture – a theory that views the media outside the context of culture will be afflicted with myopia. Thus, for completeness, a theory of the media requires a firm connection to culture in its every step.

While an adequate theory of media culture, in our era, is of deep significance, it would nevertheless lack a fundamental connection to more profound aspects of life that, for me, go beyond liberalism – freedom from oppression, justice, equality, and general welfare – without being tied to the political system that should aim to ensure such liberties.

While keeping such liberties in view, a social theory, when directed toward the mass media, should account for at least the following predominant facts, which characterize the intersection of culture and media in American society: the treatment of politics as entertainment or sport; the focus of image over substance; the uniformity of perspective from which the mass media cover the news; the media's seemingly vast political

power, especially in light of its proclamation of objectivity; the historical basis for the formulation of a media culture and the history behind the media's acquisition of power over the political system.

There are also relationships, like those of agency, that a theory of the media should be able to explain: How can an individual influence the mass media, and how are individuals' ideologies influenced by the media. How is resistance possible, either as a passive viewer or as an active producer, in the climate of near-monopoly ownership of the U.S. media by about 10 corporations1, since, as Roland Barthes says, "all domination begins by prohibiting language."2 The monopoly ownership of the media allows corporations to do just that in the area where forceful oppositional discourse is most desperately needed.

And there are questions of meaning that must be answered: Does a media artifact contain singular or multiple meanings? How do viewers draw meaning from media texts and images? Can not viewers project their own meaning into media artifacts? Who constructs meaning, the individual or the institution? The list goes on.

And finally: Why do so many people, including myself, watch so much bad television and consume so much rotten media, even when we know it is bad.

All these issues cannot be addressed here, but with them in mind, this essay examines the application of three strains of French social thought – structural Marxism, semiology, and postmodernism – to analyzing the mass media and their relations to culture and society. Ultimately, I seek to assess the explanatory power of Althusser's structural Marxism, Barthes's semiology, and Foucault's postmodernism when applied to the mass media.

There are, of course, several representatives of structural Marxism, semiology and postmodernism, and each of the schools has been formally applied to the media. Space, however, forbids an analysis of all three schools' representatives. It also forbids an examination of formal mass media models built upon the work of the schools' primary theorists. Thus, my focus will be on the theoretical founders of each school, and primarily on only one representative from each. I will examine Louis Althusser's structural Marxism; Roland Barthes's semiology, complemented at the margins by Baudrillard's theory; and Michel Foucault's postmodernism, with some references to Jacques Derrida's views.

With a focus on these authors, this essay will broadly delineate the theoretical approaches of the three schools in explaining the role of the mass media in society. As I proceed, I will also enumerate several strengths and weaknesses of each theory and make some comparisons among them.

The last section of the essay will ask which theory, in sum, best accounts for some of the important characteristics of the mass media in relation to culture and the social and political system.

Before proceeding, I would like to make a general disclaimer: This essay, with the goals set out above, could easily constitute a book. Thus, for the sake of brevity, many possible angles, perspectives, questions and answers – including some of those mentioned above – will not be addressed or pursued.

1.1 A Word about "Media"

The term "mass media" includes television, film, radio, the Internet, newspapers, books, advertising, music, all forms of news, the covers of compact disks, the backs of cereal boxes. I often use the word "media" as shorthand for mass media.

However, the term "media," used alone, carries a wider meaning for me, including not only all forms of mass media and telecommunications but also any image or object given the weight of meaning in society. Thus, under "media" I would subsume such obvious forms as fashion but such less obvious forms as the packaging of ordinary products and the look of automobiles and other stylized products. That is, "media" includes any medium *or object* used to communicate a message or a meaning.

2 THE THEORIES

This section defines and outlines in broad strokes the theoretical approaches of Althusser's structural Marxism, Barthes's semiology, and Foucault's postmodernism to explaining the role of the mass media in society. In my

view, Althusser's theorizing is the most complex, and thus I will attempt to render it most simply. Barthes and Foucault's theories will receive a more playful, less methodical description. When it comes to Foucault's postmodernism especially, the bounds of interpretation are, in my view, more lenient.

2.1 Althusser and Ideology

In relation to the mass media, two of the key concepts of structural Marxism are Althusser's rejection of the classical base-superstructure model and his break with viewing the media strictly as a means of production that creates false consciousness. Yet, when his theory is used to analyze the mass media, it rests on the notion of ideology, including the view that an individual is constituted by such pre-given structures as language and, in America especially, media culture. As such, Althusser's Marxism is structural because it rejects the Hegel-inspired essentialism that led on the one hand to viewing economic relations as the essence of society and on the other hand to seeing social developments as expressive of human nature. Similarly, each individual's subjectivity, in Althusser's view, is constituted by ideology, the mediating factor between the individual and the world. In this way, a structuralist line runs through much of Althusser's thought; people and categories, including economic ones, exist in a "'pre-given' complex structured whole."3 Below I expand on these concepts and their place within Althusser's thought as well as their relation to an analysis of the mass media.

In classical Marxism, the economic base of society determines the superstructure; that is, economic relations determine all social, cultural and political phenomena, which includes everything from ideology and political consciousness to media culture.

Althusser's structural Marxism, however, breaks from this strict base-superstructure model by arguing for "the relative autonomy of the superstructure with respect to the base ... [and] the reciprocal action of the superstructure on the base."4 Such a view, then, breaks from classical Marxist view that the economic base of commercial media organizations primarily determines the content of the material they produce. Instead, Althusser points the way to conceptualizing ideological practices like the media as relatively autonomous from economic determination, thereby accounting for the possibility of diverse values and viewpoints in the commercial media and for oppositional readings by their audiences.

Some schools of Marxism also see the media strictly as a means of production, the function of which is to produce "false consciousness" in the working class. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, for instance, sees the mass media as a "culture industry" producing "mass deception."5 Such a characterization of the media can in turn lead to conceiving of media products as expressions of ruling-class values, a view that ignores the diversity of values within both the ruling class and the media. In the United States, for example, the right maintains the mass media are overwhelmingly liberal, whereas the left contends that they are conservative. Both of these views exist side by side in the ruling class of mainline republicans and democrats. Conceiving of the media merely as producers of false consciousness also disallows the audience's potential to read media artifacts oppositionally, for media artifacts, on at least one theorist's view, necessarily contain representations of all oppositional tendencies within society.6

Althusser, however, rejects the notion of false consciousness, emphasizing instead that people interact with the world through ideology, which can itself be as much a determining force as the economic base. Ideology is "the 'lived' relation between men and their world."7 For Althusser, then, the mass media are ideology. Althusser goes on to distinguish ideology from science through knowledge: In science, knowledge predominates, whereas the "pracitico-social predominates" in ideology.8

By emphasizing ideology over means of production, Althusser allows for oppositional readings of the mass media as well as opening the way for a diversity of viewpoints in the media. "As Marx says," Althusser writes, "it is in ideology that men 'become conscious' of their class conflict and 'fight it out.'"9 As such, it can be through reading and viewing the media that people become conscious of their class status. And through production of media, people may fight the dominant capitalist class, though it remains unclear in Althusser's view how they can do this in the United States when nearly all the commercial media outlets are own by a small number of large corporations. At any rate, the focus on ideology lies not only at the center of Althusser's theory as directed toward the mass media, but also stands as one its strong points.

Ideology also functions to constitute individuals as subjects. Individuals get their social identities primarily through such "ideological state apparatuses" as the mass media.10 Indeed, according to Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake's 1988 book Film Theory: An Introduction, it is through such apparatuses as the mass media that people obtain not only a sense of identity but also an understanding of reality. That is, ideology, even though it has relative autonomy, serves to recast people as subjects, leading them to view themselves as self-determining agents when they are in fact shaped by pre-given ideological processes.

2.1.1 Althusser's Strengths and Weaknesses

Some strengths and weaknesses of Althusser's structural Marxism as applied to the media, beyond those mentioned above, include the following:

- It discounts the free agency of individuals both in and outside the media industries to explicitly and directly influence the content of the mass media.

- Since ideological forms such as the media contribute to reproducing the existing system, Althusser's theory bumps up against functionalism, opening itself up to many the criticisms that have been aimed at that theory.

- In Althusser's theory, mass media texts, along with other ideological apparatuses, lead people to develop not only a sense of personal reality but also an understanding of reality. The problem here, however, is that such a view fails to account for the possibility of an individual projecting his or her own meaning into a media text.

This weakness coexists with what I see as another: Althusser's anti-humanism. He seems to reject that the individual is a self-conscious, autonomous being whose actions could be explained in terms of personal beliefs or intentions. As such, Althusser's theory fails to explain how an individual can appropriate media texts and images for his or her own ends independent of influences by the dominant ideology.

On the other hand, a central strength of Althusser's theory, especially in contrast to classical Marxism, is summed up by Stewart Hall. Structural Marxism dodges a

> "general and wide-ranging criticism advanced against classical marxism itself: its rigid structural determinacy, its reductionism of two varieties – class and economic; its way of conceptualizing the social formation itself. Marx's model of ideology has been criticized because it did not conceptualize the social formation as a determinate complex formation, composed of different practices, but as a simple (or, as Althusser called it in For Marx and Reading Capital, an 'expressive') structure. By this Althusser meant that one practice – 'the economic' – determines in a direct manner all others, and each effect is simply and simultaneously reproduced correspondingly (i.e., 'expressed') on all other levels."11

However, the lack of emphasis on economic determination may also lead to a weakness when Althusser's theory is applied to the climate of media culture in the United States, where nearly all the mass media are owned by a few conglomerates. This media monopoly creates a uniformity of perspective that contains few moments of diversity outside those imposed by the oppositional readings of individuals. Classical Marxism's emphasis on the economic base, which highlights ownership and control of the media, perhaps better explains the current status of the mass media in the United States – or at least helps focus an analyst on a crucial issue.

2.2 Roland Barthes's Semiology

Roland Barthes's semiology finds it foundation in the structural linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, who posited an abstract notion known as *langue* to explain the system of language.

Central to Saussure's theory is the sign, which is in langue. The sign emerges at the conjunction of the signified and the signifier, both of which are in *parole,* or a language's concrete properties. In Saussurean

linguistics, the signifier is the speech sound, and the signified is the concept or idea in the mind of the speaker. The sign is the entity that brings the two together, and it gains its meaning only in relation or opposition to other signs in the system. Hence the meaning of any sign is not only a social convention but also an arbitrary construction. Barthes expands Saussure's theory to the domain of culture, analyzing how objects and media function as signs in the social system. Barthes is particularly interested in the connotation, as opposed to denotation, of social signs; that is, their secondary meaning. His analyses of objects, media and other signs often seek to debunk the myths, or false representations, that surround them and appear natural. Such myths are used to construct an illusory social reality that distorts society's actual structures of power and reinforces the capitalist ideology. Barthes's semiology, then, seeks to expose these myths for what they are by analyzing the sign and its relation to other signs in the social system. For Barthes, "a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article; even objects will become speech, if they mean something."12

The expansion of Saussure's linguistic theory to the domain of culture centers on Barthes's notion that there are, in effect, two semiological systems. The first, called by Barthes the language-object, is the system of language, image, or other modes of representation; in themselves, they can contain myths. The second, called the metalanguage, is a layer of myth behind the first "in which one speaks about the first" level and only needs "to know its total term, or global sign, and only inasmuch as this term lends itself to myth."13 Myth, that is, is a "second-order semiological system"14 that contains, like the first system, the tri-dimensional pattern of signifier, signified, and sign.

Barthes provides an example. A photograph shows a black man in a French uniform saluting what Barthes says is probably the French flag. This is the first-level meaning of the picture, what can be seen as its denotation. The second-level meaning of the picture is its connotation, which contains a myth: "That France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors."15

Barthes's example is important because it is taken from a magazine, *Paris-Match*. Thus Barthes's semiology has a powerful relation to the media; it is, in fact, a theory constructed for analyzing the media and the products of a capitalistic society.

2.2.1 Advantages and Disadvantages of Semiology

Thus, semiology is, in essence, a theory of media and other signs with cultural meaning. It is, more than anything else, a theory of how products, objects, images and texts, whether literary or popular, derive their meanings. One of the great strengths of the semiological approach, then, in contrast to Althusser's theory, is that it provides a direct, explicit method for decoding the images, objects, and words that appear in the media.

Other strengths of Barthes's semiology stem from his use of Saussurean linguistics. For instance, the meanings of such cultural signs as media images, seen as "natural" by viewers, are revealed as social conventions, as arbitrary constructions, which are often fabricated by one class – the bourgeoisie in Mythologies – to dominate or deceive another. Because these meanings appear to be natural, Barthes says, "the myth consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system."16

Yet the same grounding in Saussurean linguistics that gives Barthes's semiology its power to reveal seemingly natural meanings as socially constructed myths by viewing them as signs in a synchronic, or static, system also produces a major weakness: It may forego taking into account important historical, or diachronic, aspects of cultural signs in their social systems, which have been constructed *historically.* In other words, semiology, when applied to such cultural artifacts as the media, fails to adequately take history into account. This weakness stands in stark contrast to the strengths of a historically grounded theory, like Althusser's Marxism.

Another strength in Barthes's writings is that he has an explanation for a befuddling recurrence: Why so many people watch so much bad television even when they know it is awful. Barthes's answer: pleasure. He

elaborates thus:

> "If I judge a text according to pleasure, I cannot go on to say: this one is good, that bad. No awards, no 'critique," for this always implies a tactical aim, a social usage, and frequently an extenuating image-reservoir."17

And, more poignantly:

> "it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence [for example] of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the stage of an appearance-as-disappearance."18

Unfortunately, however, semiological analysis is stained by a number of disadvantages, especially when directed away from the media and onto other features of the world:

- It generalizes – and at times overgeneralizes – about all media's content, and perhaps about all of society's, too.

- It is a reductionist approach that subsumes everything under the sign, concealing for instance the role of such actors and free agents as journalists, editors, and managers in producing media.

- Combining both of the above objections, semiology often attempts to assign a singular, over-arching meaning to a sign, a practice that Derrida rejects through his notion of diffErance. Barthes writes, as noted above, that the semiologist only needs "to know its total term, or global sign, and only inasmuch as this term lends itself to myth." But how can one know that there is a single meaning or a "global sign" instead of many meanings lurking behind the first-order representations.

Likewise with the notion of myth: Who is to say what constitutes the myth? Barthes writes, also as noted above, that "even objects will become speech, if they mean something." But who is to say *if* they mean something, or *what* they mean for that matter. An object can easily come to have meanings that change with the subject viewing it, a possibility which clashes with Barthes's belief that behind the first-order representation lies a myth in the form of a "total term" or "global sign." The theory crumbles into subjectivity.

Yet Barthes, to his credit, realizes this, and moves to call it not subjectivity but individuality:

> Whenever I attempt to 'analyze' a text which has given me pleasure, it is not my 'subjectivity' I encounter but my 'individuality,' the given which makes my body separate from other bodies and appropriates its suffering or its pleasure: it is my body of bliss I encounter. And this body of bliss is also my historical subject; for it is at the conclusion of a very complex process of biographical, historical, sociological, neurotic elements ... that I control the contradictory interplay of (cultural) pleasure and (noncultural) bliss, and that I write myself as a subject ... "19

This except, however, is also important on another level: By emphasizing both individual subject and author it distinguishes Barthes's theory from convictions expounded by Foucault, toward whose postmodern theory Barthes drifts ever closer in The Pleasure of the Text as he uses, for instance, more quotations from Nietzsche than in some of his earlier works.

- Semiology also abstracts images and texts into the realm of *langue,* thereby removing them from the concrete world and, some argue, the realm of objective science.

- Similarly, it locks the semiologist into a technical frame of analysis that can at times make the method a substitute for reality. Or worse: Some semiotic analyses are presented as if they are "scientific" accounts of meaning rather than subjective ones.

- And, perhaps worst of all, semiology, in contrast to other forms of structuralism, does not allow for content hidden behind the signs of the media. Barthes, in Mythologies, writes that "however paradoxical it may seem, *myth hides nothing:* its function is to distort, not to make disappear."20 In contrast to psychoanalytic theories of meaning, "there is no latency of the concept in relation to form: there is no need of an unconscious in order to explain myth."21

This is a difficult position to justify, however, especially in light of Saussure's initial insight that "the sign always to some extent eludes control by the will, whether of the individual or of society: that is its essential nature."22 Saussure meant not only linguistic signs but social ones, too: common objects, products, things. Saussure, that is, believed there could be unconscious or unmotivated meanings behind signs. Barthes's theory seems to trap him into assuming that there is always intention or agency behind a sign's myth.

2.3 Foucault: A Lover's Discourse

Roland Barthes, writing in the early 1970s, begins The Pleasure of the Text with these words:

> "Imagine someone . . . who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simple discard of that old specter: logical contradiction; who mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible; who silently accepts every charge of illogicality, of incongruity; who remains passive in the face of Socratic irony (leading the interlocutor to the supreme disgrace: self-contradiction) and legal terrorism (how much penal evidence is based on a psychology of consistency!). Such a man would be the mockery of our society: court, school, asylum, polite conversation would cast him out: who endures contradiction without shame? Now this anti-hero exists: he is the reader of the text at the moment he takes his pleasure."23

With but a few minor revisions and reservations, this except could be used to describe Michel Foucault. Barthes, of course, was not explicitly writing of Foucault, but I find it hard to fathom that he could not have made the connection, at least fleetingly, as he was composing the passage. Or, more dramatically, perhaps Barthes had just been reading Foucault, taking his pleasure, when he had the thought of an anti-hero reading the anti-hero. For it is Foucault who rises above the Cartesian *Weltanschauung* to show us what lies beyond its arbitrary structures, for it is Foucault who reverses the paradigm, making a mockery of court in Discipline and Punish and of asylum in Madness and Civilization. Taking Barthes's passage in turn, it is Foucault who abolishes the exclusions of the past and discards the arbitrary constraints of reason, Foucault who reexamines and reconnects aspects of language said to have been irreconcilable, Foucault who reveals the ultimate philosophical irony: truth often lies not so much in scientific method, with its birth perhaps in the Socratic method, but in discourse. Truth, that is, no longer falls within the *logical* confines of the Socratic method but within the discourse of it, within an analysis of established categories of language, thought, and history.

But even though the lines of The Pleasure of the Text excerpted above can be interpreted as Barthes's late-career homage to Foucault's postmodernism, Foucault would dispute the ability of semiological analysis to detect a singular, over-arching meaning or myth under the cloak of signifier and signified, as Barthes and Baudrillard often attempt to do. In Mythologies, for example, Barthes writes: "What wrestling is above all meant to portray is a purely moral concept: that of justice."24 In another essay in Mythologies, Barthes acknowledges the "quick-change artistry of plastic" but then goes on to say that "plastic is, all told, a spectacle to be deciphered: the very spectacle of its end-products"25 (with spectacle being a somewhat technical term meaning "the interplay of action, representation and alienation in man and in society"26). For Barthes, plastic becomes the ultimate sign of transmutation: "Plastic, sublimated as movement, hardly exists as substance."27 In fact:

> "The hierarchy of substances is abolished: a single one replaces them all: the whole world can be plasticized, and even life itself since, we are told, they are beginning to make plastic aortas."28

The media are a bit like plastic themselves: They are, in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's words, "an ever-changing sameness." And, also like plastic, the whole world, life itself, is being turned into media.

Barthes's playfulness notwithstanding, however, no sign, no word, contains a singular interpretation for Foucault, even perhaps as metaphor. Not even plastic, though the word is of course used here by Foucault in its material sense:

> "Between word and image, between what is depicted by language and what is uttered by plastic form, the unity begins to dissolve; a single and identical meaning is not immediately common to them. And if it is true that the image still has the function of speaking, of transmitting something

consubstantial with language, we must recognize that it already no longer says the same thing . . . "29

Foucault is speaking of painting, but the same might be said about the mass media, not only of their images but also of their signs, their representations, their references: their language. Why? A liberation from reason, an unfolding into madness. A liberation that

> "derives from a proliferation of meaning, from a self-multiplication of significance, weaving relationships so numerous, so intertwined, so rich, that they can no longer be deciphered except in the esoterism of knowledge. Things themselves become so burdened with attributes, signs, allusions that they finally lose their own form. Meaning is no longer read in an immediate perception, the figure no longer speaks for itself; between the knowledge which animates it and the form into which it is transposed, a gap widens."30

This except captures quite precisely the application of Foucault's postmodernism to media analysis. Rendered thus, Foucault's theory bears a direct similarity to Derrida's notion of diffErance: there is at once the difference, or contrast, of signs in a structural system that produces meaning and the endless deferral of meaning. That is, there is no "final or fixed point or privileged, meaning-determining relationship with the extralinguistic world."31

Hence: there is not much to analyze, for meaning is fleeting, perspectival, perhaps even self-indulgent, though even that is somewhat contradictory since there is no subject. Analysis itself, especially of the kind steeped in reason, becomes irrelevant, an anachronism. Postmodernism, then, becomes not so much an explanation of media content as an acknowledgement that there are myriad explanations behind any particular sign or image: "So many diverse meanings are established beneath the surface of the image that it presents only an enigmatic face."32

But perhaps I'm construing Foucault's postmodernism too broadly. For there is a disjunction of sorts between Foucault's own theory and the methodology that he uses to analyze histories and texts. Thus, a better indicator of how Foucault's thought could be used to analyze the mass media and their relations to society may lie more in his methodology than in his theory: a questioning and analysis of categorization and its relations to power, for both are present in abundance in the mass media, including such categories as objectivity as truth.

How, specifically, does Foucault develop his analyses? First, it is a genealogy of sorts, and a questioning of the external conditions of production. The rest of the answer comes from Foucault in Madness and Civilization. In this excerpt the word "media" could be substituted for the first instance of the word "madness":

> "To write the history of madness thus will mean the execution of a structural study of an historical ensemble – notions, institutions, juridical and police measures, scientific concepts – which holds captive a madness whose wild state can never in itself be restored."33

2.3.1 Pros and Cons of a Postmodern Approach

Many aspects of Foucault's theory, and of postmodernism in general, are applicable to developing a theory of the mass media. For example, and importantly for an analysis of the media, Foucault sees meaning as socially constructed by institutions, including such institutions as televisions networks, publishing houses and newspapers chains.

Other highly applicable concepts include the following: * The notion, following from the death of the subject, that the condition of authorship has been dissolved, leaving only an author position that places an emphasis on what is said. This vision can be particularly powerful in analyzing the content of the mass media, especially television, where it is unimportant who says what; in fact, on television the "author," including the anchors of the networks' news, is often an actor.

However, the dissolution of authorship is double-edged, containing a weakness that matches its strength. Because of the death of the subject and the dissolution of the author, there does not seem to be much room for an individual to project his or her own meaning into a media artifact, as Roland Barthes, if nothing else,

has proven that he can do. Further: It leads little room for the construction of resistance by an individual acting alone, especially if that individual decides to resist through the production of his or her own discourse in the media. Does individual resistance die with the death of the subject?

Indeed, this leads me to a major criticism of Foucault's postmodernism when applied to the media. If the only way in which political action becomes possible within postmodernism is through producing an alternative discourse, how is political action or resistance possible in the U.S. media when nearly all of them are owned by a small number of large corporations intent on perpetuating the dominant discourse?

- A rejection of the notion of truth in favor of an unbroken chain of signifiers. Such a position becomes powerful when combined with the postmodern emphasis on text over speech, especially if images can be substituted for the notion of text. Who says what does not matter, nor what is said.

Example: In his book Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy, James Fallows gives an example of how TV images smother speech with an anecdote about a CBS reporter doing a story on President Ronald Reagan in 1984. The reporter, Lesley Stahl, had documented the contradiction between what Reagan said and what he did by showing him speaking at the Special Olympics and at a nursing home while pointing out that he had cut funding to children with disabilities and opposed funding for public health. After Stahl's piece was broadcast, she got a call from a White House official, who praised her piece. Surprised by the compliments, she asked the White House official why he wasn't upset, pointing out that her piece had nailed the president. The official replied:

> "You television people still don't get it. No one heard what you said. Don't you people realize that the picture is all that counts. A powerful picture drowns out the words."34

Perhaps this statement captures postmodern politics in action. Only postmodernism, then, seems able to explain why all that matters is the unbroken chain of signifiers, specifically here in the form of television footage. On television, it no longer matters who is speaking – or what is being said.

In this way, and also in a more direct manner by placing an emphasis on dominant discourse, postmodernism accounts for the close power relationship between politics and the news.

- Postmodernism also contains a strength for media analysis in its exhortation that those elements repressed by the dominant discourse must be addressed. Just as much importance is placed on what is not said as on what is said. Yet in this exhortation also lies a weakness: Surely some of what is not said, some of the discourse repressed by the dominant discourse, is fascist or otherwise evil and inhuman.

Nevertheless, a focus on marginal discourses in the context of the discourse of power that take place regularly in the mass media may lead to valuable insights.

3 THE POWER OF THE EXPLANATION

In this section I will conclude my essay by arguing not for the superiority of one of the theories over the others for analyzing the mass media but rather for the use of all three theories, and others, as appropriate to the media in question.

As each has its strengths and weaknesses, none of the three theories set out above stands out definitively above the others in its explanatory power when it comes to accounting for the mass media's role in American society. Foucault's analysis of the categories that the media use, along with his emphasis on discourse, is a powerful tool, but it lacks a concrete explanation of how individual action can influence the media. In addition, it lacks a strong political component – which is a necessary perspective from which to diagnose a media as politicized as the United States'. Barthes's semiology is at once useful and seductive, but contains, in the end, too many shortcomings. And while Althusser's Marxism provides a better context with which to view the intricate structural workings and influences of the media on ideology than classical Marxism, it at the same time sets itself up, through its very granting of relative autonomy to ideological apparatuses, to discounting the powerful role played by America's media conglomerates.

Baudrillard's mixing of semiology and postmodernism in his book America becomes an example of how theories can be combined to achieve a greater degree of explanatory power than if one view is used to the exclusion of others.

More explicitly, Douglas Kellner, in his book Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern, conceives of theories as "instruments, as providing tools in a toolkit"35 that can be used depending on context and one's purpose, a strategy he attributes to Foucault but one that can be traced back to Nietzsche's radical perspectivism.

In fact, Foucault's method of analysis, especially as used in Madness and Civilization, seems to bear this out, producing profound and powerful critiques of society's established categories, and thus the tools-in-a-toolbox approach leads to the superiority of Foucault's theory in general and perhaps as directed toward the media as well.

The tools-in-a-toolkit approach – combined with Foucault's powerful method of archaeological excavation and his use of poststructural analyses of the signs in a social system, along with the more general aspects of postmodernism that seem to fit the mass media so well – gives Foucault's theory more explanatory power than the others. In fact, postmodernism can be seen as a theory that has arisen in response to and as part of the media and technological age, as part of an age when culture is defined as much by media, especially television, as by such longer-standing cultural forms as literature, art, and music.

Postmodernism's lack of explicit political content, however, remains for me problematic, as does its decentering of the subject and its approach to political action. In postmodernism, political action lies in the formation of a counter discourse within existing discourse, an enterprise which seems particularly difficult if not impossible in America, considering that the U.S. media are owned and controlled by a small number of corporations.

4 NOTES

1. Ben Bagdikian, The Media Monopoly, 4th Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. ix.

2. Roland Barthes, S/Z, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 68.

3. Louis Althusser, {width="100" height="158"}] For Marx], trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 1996), p. 193.

4. Althusser, quoted by Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, Film Theory: An Introduction (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 5.

5. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 120 ff.

6. Douglas Kellner, Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern (London: Routledge, 1995), throughout the book.

7. Louis Althusser, For Marx, p. 252. Translator's glossary.

8. Ibid. p. 252. Translator's glossary.

9. Louis Althusser, For Marx, p. 11.

10. Daniel Chandler, "Marxist Media Theory," published on the World Wide Web at http://www.aber.ac.uk/~dgc/marxism.html 1994. Chandler is a professor of media studies and mass communication at a university in Great Britain.

11. Stuart Hall, "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees," p. 29. Italics in original.

12. Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 111.

13. Ibid. p. 115.

14. Ibid. p. 114.

15. Ibid. p. 116.

16. Ibid. p. 131.

17. Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 13.

18. Ibid. p. 10.

19. Ibid. p. 62. Italics in original.

20. Roland Barthes, Mythologies, p. 121. Italics in original.

21. Ibid. p. 121.

22. Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1983), p. 16.

23. Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, p. 3. Italics in original.

24. Roland Barthes, Mythologies, p. 21.

25. Ibid. p. 97.

26. Ibid. p. 7. Translator's Note.

27. Ibid. p. 98.

28. Ibid. p. 99.

29. Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 18. Italics in original.

30. Ibid. pp. 18-19.

31. Simon Blackburn, The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 105.

32. Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization, p. 20.

33. Foucault, quoted by Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 44.

34. James Fallows, Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy (New York: Pantheon, 1996), p. 62.

35. Douglas Kellner, Media Culture, p. 24.

5 PROPOSAL AND OUTLINE FOR THIS ESSAY

I propose to write an essay that examines the application of three strains of French social thought – structural Marxism, semiology, and postmodernism – to analyzing the mass media. In general, the essay will seek to examine the perspectives of these three schools toward the mass media and its relation to culture, society, and the political and economic order.

The first section of the essay will delineate the theoretical approaches of the three schools to explaining the role of the mass media in society. As needed, I will extrapolate extensions of the theories in an attempt to account for and explain characteristics of the mass media.

The second section of the essay will compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of the three theories in explaining the mass media and its relationship to the structure of a capitalist society. I will do this by applying the three French theories to features of current U.S. media culture.

In the third section, I will argue for the superiority of one of the theories over the others, grounding my argument in the power of the theory to adequately explain several important characteristics of the mass media in relation to society and the social system.

In the final section of the essay, I will examine the views of one of the three schools – the one that I argued was superior in section three – on the relationship between the media and resistance. How, for example, have French scholars operating within the school seen the media as either undermining or fostering resistance to the dominant social order? To follow up on section two's application of the theory to U.S. media culture, I will investigate how the theory allows for resistance, through the media, against domination by corporate capitalism, a particularly important question considering the near-monopoly ownership of most of the country's media by 11 corporations.[1]

1. Ben Bagdikian, The Media Monopoly, 4th Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. ix.

5.1 Proposal Bibliography

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Structural Marxism
Althusser          For Marx
Althusser et al    Reading Capital
Others as needed.


Semiology
R. Barthes         Mythologies
R. Barthes         Writing Degree Zero
R. Barthes         S/Z
R. Barthes         The Pleasures of the Text

Baudrillard        The Mirror of Production
Baudrillard        Selected Writings
Baudrillard        For a Critique of the Political
                   Economy of the Sign
Baudrillard        "The Ecstasy of Communication,"
                   in Hal Foster ed., Anti-Aesthetic
Baudrillard        America

Postmodernism
Derrida            Writing and Difference
Deleuze            Foucault
Foucault           Language, Countermemory and Power
Foucault           This is Not a Pipe
Foucault           The Order of Things
Foucault           Madness and Civilization

Structuralism
Bourdieu           "Structuralism and the Theory
                   of the Sociology of Knowledge"
Levi-Strauss       The Savage Mind
Levi-Strauss       Structural Anthropology
Saussure           Course in General Linguistics
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6 Related

- Corporate Journalism: How Corporate Ownership of the Media Undermines Democracy