James Lull Inside family viewing: ethnographic research on television’s audiences.

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Martin McLoone

The Audience Strikes Back?

James Lull has been, for a number of years now, a phantom presence in the work of a number of European researchers, appearing regularly in the footnotes of those writers committed to an ethnographic approach to the study of television and popular culture. As David Morley explains in the Preface to this collection of essays, covering a decade of Lull’s ethnographic research, his work has, until now, been available only in a number of North American journals not easily accessible to European researchers in general. The publication of his work on this side of the Atlantic is, therefore, an event to be noted and welcomed.

Lull’s research findings and methodological formulation may also prove to be both significant and controversial. I suspect though, that this might stem less from what he himself has to offer (interesting and informative as that is) but more from the way in which his work inserts itself into wider intellectual discourse. In a sense, this publication fills a gap in the pre-history of a major trend in current European research, more familiar to us in the work of David Morley himself, Ian Ang, Janice Radway and, more controversially, John Fiske.

In the first essay in the book, written especially for this volume, Lull writes -

I am committed to rigorous empiricism (consistent with the methodological ideals of science), but I have been impressed by the theoretical visions of several cultural studies writers and believe that much of this work is on the cutting edge of communication research.

He acknowledges as major influences, the writers associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and in particular, the theoretical formulations of Stuart Hall. The major significance of Lull’s work, therefore, lies in his declared intention of bringing together the hitherto quite hostile discourses of American empiricism and European Marxist theory. The interest of these essays is in seeing how Lull attempts to devise empirical methodologies and theoretical formulations to effect such a seemingly impossible reconciliation.

Lull emerges here as a committed humanist. He provides us with a personal account of his disenchantment with ‘classical’ American communications research, with its emphasis on hypothetico-deductive logic, quantitative data-flows, scientific models and a mountain of dehumanized statistics. He has always been more interested in locating the human voice at the centre of the communications process and this has led to embrace the largely marginalized methodologies of ethnography. In this personal odyssey in search of the personal he hailed as kindred spirits those writers associated with the CCCS who have similarly broken with ‘classical’ Marxism and its ‘de-humanized’ master-narrative of economic determinacy. This debate within Marxism, and especially the CCCS appropriation of Gramsci and Althusser, seemed to legitimize Lull’s own ethnographic inclinations and provide theoretical justification for validating the personal experiences of an audience perceived as relatively autonomous from the ideological operations of the text as well as from politico-economic determination.

The most interesting essays in this collection are therefore, those which address the question of empiricist methodology. (Lull himself has little to say in relation to cultural theory or about the operation of television texts. The real task of reconciliation, it seems to me, has been conducted by those writers in cultural studies who have in turn appropriated Lull for their own project.)

Indeed the essays collected here constitute an exemplary primer for all budding ethnographers. His major contribution to the field was to pioneer research into family viewing and he lays out very clearly and at some length how, and to what purpose this can be achieved.

Ethnography, he argues, is organized around participant observation, the use of informants and in-depth interviewing. The object is to understand ‘the everyday world of social groups, their pattern of interpersonal communication and their uses of the mass media’. In relation to television viewing, Lull, quite correctly, has identified that the vast majority of viewing is conducted within the family (and those social configurations which pass for the family in contemporary society).

The method, when applied to television’s primary audience, requires that the researcher enter the natural domain of his (sic) subjects - the family home. The willingness
and abilities of the researcher are strongly tested by the prospect of this intrusion into such a small and private social unit.

Lull offers advice on how this intrusion can be managed and makes suggestions on how families can be located in the first place (through Church groups, girls and boys clubs, Parent Teacher Associations, etc.). The result of all this is to demonstrate that family viewing is an active process and that television functions in a more complex way in the dynamics of the family than expressions like 'goggle-box', 'couch potato' or 'plug-in-drug' might indicate. Indeed Lull offers an impressively complex typology of family types and both the uses to which families put television and the kinds of pleasure they derive from it.

Now this is all very well, but a nod in the direction of Birmingham is not going to make the obvious objections to this kind of empiricist research go away. For example, no matter how interesting and informative his typology of pleasures might be, what in the end does it tell us that is new? That audiences watch television actively? The fact that audiences eat, drink, have sex, do their home-work or office-work, cook, wash, mend, and iron while watching television has been known by television schedulers and market researchers for years.

Furthermore, what motivates some families, and not others, to allow this kind of research intrusion? Perhaps precisely the kind of family which is likely to conform to the researcher's expectations? In other words, doesn't the researcher run the risk of 'creating' an ideal audience and an ideal audience response? Doesn't this intrusion, inevitably and always, change the viewing situation, no matter how skilled, diplomatic or self-effacing the researcher might be? How, therefore, can the researcher 'believe' informants? How, therefore, can we 'believe' the researcher?

Most questions will inevitably arise in relation to Lull's appropriation of ideology theory and theories of textual operation. In what is, perhaps, the key essay in this collection, Lull proposes what he calls 'a rules perspective' for television research. An important potential contribution of this rules approach, he argues, is that it 'weaves together issues of media criticism with empirical accounts of the relationship between audience members and sources of television programming ... Importantlj, the rules perspective promotes analysis of audience members as active agents in the creation of reality' (my emphasis).

It is this crucial formulation, of course, which lies at the centre of much contemporary work (in Fiske, for example, it is dubbed 'semiotic democracy'). It leaves unanswered the objection that, as the CCS work has shown, television texts are not 'open' but at the very least offer to audiences a preferred meaning. It does not allow for the fact, central to all forms of Marxism, that audiences are already socialized in such a way that they have only limited and sanctioned access to discourses which allow for resisting preferred meanings.

The ultimate danger, of course, is a political one. If audiences are active agents (if the semiotic democracy exists) what is the point of mobilizing for social change, or for a different kind of television? There is no sense in Lull's work, for example, that different kinds of television might offer different (and one would hope better) pleasures. Isn't Lull's kind of formulation very close to the 'sovereignty of the consumer' which is at the centre of neo-liberal dismantling of public service broadcasting?

Finally, if as Lull maintains, audiences are active agents in the creation of reality, why does this not manifest itself more directly in wider political and economic discourse? And if I have missed something, why is it that the reality thus created is so conducive to the maintenance of the status quo - to existing economic power relations?

To answer these questions, I fear the skilled researcher will be forced to leave behind the personal voice of the audience and to re-engage questions of ideology. As Stuart Hall has argued -

... to think about or to analyse the complexity of the real ... necessitates the use of the power of abstraction and analysis, the formation of concepts with which to cut into the complexity of the real, in order precisely to reveal and bring to light relationships and structures which cannot be visible to the naive naked eye (Hall, 1980).

It would be churlish, of course, to accuse Lull of naivety - his own work adds a dimension to television studies which has been extremely influential. But I suspect that this work will now become a primary site for contentious debate and his humanist formulations will be used in evidence against him.

Reference

Josephine Langham *Teachers and television - a history of the IBA's educational fellowship scheme.*

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Brian O'Neill

_Teachers and Television_ documents a fairly unique phenomenon: critical research sponsored by a broadcasting institution and carried out by influential members of the audience. It is an account of the IBA’s Educational Fellowship Scheme which over a period of seventeen years provided practising teachers with a unique opportunity to study the form and content of educational broadcasting. British educational television is admired throughout the world and is accepted as an essential component of the public service remit. Research about the purpose and uses of television in the classroom has however been fairly scant and up to 1984, when regrettably it finished, the Fellowship Scheme was one of the few programmes of published research on the educative role of broadcasting. From the hostile attitudes that greeted its introduction in the 1950’s to today’s reliance and indeed celebration of television’s liberating influence, _Teachers and Television_ is an historical record full of insight into the parallel development of education and broadcasting.

The idea for the scheme came from the IBA’s Educational Advisory Council which initially considered financing Schoolmaster Fellowships for one university term for ‘the training of teachers in the classroom use of television.’ The scheme was later extended to a full year’s scholarship and enabled teachers, broadcasters, researchers and others to undertake and publish research on a wide range of issues relating to broadcasting for the educational sector. In the early years, the main beneficiaries of the Fellowship Scheme were probably the participants themselves and it was the hope of the IBA that they would act as ambassadors for educational TV among their less enthusiastic colleagues. Curiously, educational TV began in Britain not on BBC but on Associated Rediffusion, a forerunner to Thames TV, in 1957. Schools broadcasting had been hotly debated for some time, particularly once it was known that the commercial network would be there first and with the blessings of the educational establishment, if not quite the teachers in the classroom. By the beginning of the 1960’s television was in many of the nation’s classrooms and, as Josephine Langham points out, came to be accepted as an inevitable but also useful part of modern life. Many teachers were concerned about the cultural values portrayed on television, particularly the commercial network whose introduction they had opposed, and they were slow to accept the new technology. However, as educational philosophy changed to being child-centred and as teachers accepted the need for more training, so schools broadcasting came to be an integral part of the curriculum both primary and secondary. Indeed, it was the introduction of schools TV for primary level that proved a breakthrough given the ease with which it was integrated into the system and the enthusiasm with which it was received.

It is against this background that Josephine Langham reconstructs the seventeen years of research that comprised the Fellowship Scheme. It was clear that research into the use of educational TV could be of enormous interest and benefit to the programme producers as well as the teachers. Over the course of the scheme many of the key issues of the day were taken up ranging from television in the primary school, media studies, science teaching on television, pre-school programming and indeed wider areas of adult education and community and social action broadcasting.

Inevitably the quality of the research did vary: teachers are neither broadcasters nor professional researchers. But they are the users of educational programmes and the Fellowship Scheme provided a mechanism for a considered and serious response to the efforts of broadcasters. The support of the IBA in this was crucial. From the outset they were prepared to take research findings seriously and ensured that the fellowships were hosted in universities with a proven interest in educational broadcasting. The author points out many examples of how research had practical applications in audience research and the development of not only new programmes but support services and strategies for using television more effectively.

A significant part of the Fellowship work has been published and has by now entered the mainstream of educational literature. A case in point is the work of Len Masterman who as a result of research under the Fellowship scheme in 1976 wrote the seminal _Teaching about Television_, a landmark in the development of television studies in schools. Masterman’s book provided the key to the popularization of media studies as a subject by combining a solidly practical approach with a challenging theoretical
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Mary E. Brown *Television and women's culture: the politics of the popular*  
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Patsy Murphy

Television and Women’s Culture contains a selection of essays that examine television popular culture programmes through a feminist perspective. The argument put forward by Ms Brown and adhered to by the contributors is briefly that TV programmes, which are often dismissed as mere dross, play an important role in women’s lives in that women use such programmes as means of ‘negotiating their own meanings and their own aesthetic appreciation’. Thus for example, quiz shows are looked at in one essay, not as a mere manifestation of greed allied to competition but as a forum for women to use those underrated skills that they have acquired in their domestic lives. To wit shopping and indeed the book makes some interesting observations about the social role of the department store and the shopping mall in women’s lives.

The problem with such a collection is that some of the arguments are perhaps more persuasive than others. I would draw the readers’ attention particularly to ‘Cagney and Lacey: Feminist Strategies of Detection’ by Danae Clark which is both informative and illuminating. Quoting Rosenweig’s summary that Cagney and Lacey is not a show about two cops who happen to be women but about two women who happen to be cops, Ms Clark deftly illustrates how the popular series deals with personal life, decision making processes, female bonding and the use of private space and time. Of similar worth is Lisa A. Lewis’s essay ‘Consumer Girl Culture: How Music Video Appeals to Girls’ which makes a perceptive and strong case for showing that Madonna and Cyndi Lauper have used the medium of the rock video to subvert it and remove it from male domination. My enjoyment of the Cagney and Lacey essays was enhanced by the fact that I know the series very well. My enjoyment of Ms Lewis’s essay was in no way dimmed by the fact that my acquaintance with rock video is slim to say the least. I found the thesis intriguing and the essay - oh rare delight - celebratory of women. I’m now eager to watch a Madonna tape and have been humming Ms Lauper’s ‘Girls just want to have fun’ ever since. I would suggest a reading of this essay could usefully be followed by a screening of Margo Harkin’s award winning film ‘Hush-a-bye Baby’ - noting the use the director makes of Ms Lauper’s song in this fine film.

Not all essays are as good. Andrea Press’s essay on the difference between working class women’s reaction to Dynasty and the reactions of middle class women to the same programme, whilst having good material to hand seemed in the end naive, dull and despite its feminist perspective, patronizing. Ms Lewis’s conclusion is that middle class women enjoy the machinations of Alexis et al. as fantasy whereas working class women see the behaviour as real. This surely must be related to one’s knowledge of the world as one encounters it. A reader of *HH* magazine or for that matter the *Hello*
may well view the lives of the non-fictional rich as being similar to the lives led by Krystal and the Carrington entourage. Surely it cannot have taken years of research to discover that 'the primary function of romance reading for middle class women was that the act of reading itself gave them the time away from their duties to husbands and children, time for themselves alone', an activity that Ms Press finds analogous to watching Dynasty. "Melodramatic Identifications: Television Fiction and Women's Fantasy" uses Dallas as a text and delivers its thesis with much more verve.

A lively Australian essay 'Women Audiences and the Workplace' in which female tele-sales operators describe how they incorporate the narration of their favourite TV soaps into their working lives, merits attention for the vivid picture it gives of working women as much as for what it tells you about their relation to TV.

Television and Women's Culture has the virtue of concentrating on a field of television too often dismissed and rarely looked at from a feminist perspective. Its problem lies in the fact that the worth of the perspective offered varies considerably. When it is good it is very very good; when it is bad it is not horrid just rather dull.

Jean Baudrillard Cool memories Translated by Chris Turner
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Richard Kearney

Cool Memories is just that bit too cool to be true. In fact, truth no longer exists for this author: and facts are merely imitations of facts. The world, as we think we know it, is no more than a simulation. But worse, it's a simulation without any original to simulate. The old reliable distinction between artifice and reality has collapsed.

Given this epistemological thesis, it is not surprising to discover that the American dream factory has become a favourite stamping ground for Jean Baudrillard in recent works. In Simulations and Simulacra he had this to say about the all-pervasiveness of the US image industry epitomized by Disneyland:

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is all of 'real' America which is Disneyland. Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal or of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real...

In America he explored this play of interminable simulation in all its everyday folly, the tone being one of ironic revelry and irreverence. With Cool Memories we get what the author calls 'the other side of America.' Written in the form of a desultory diary which never takes itself too seriously, it nonetheless explores the darker sides of the postmodern 'société du spectacle'. It probes the silences, the omissions, the brutalities, the absurdities that float about in the wreckage of a modern world suddenly abandoned by the strong ideologies of Messianism and Marxism. Having travelled from the Marxist Left of the sixties to the all-American frisson of the seventies, Baudrillard now finds himself wading through wavelets of melancholy, trying to make some sense of the bric-a-brac of postmodern consumer culture, trying to salvage - or at least savour - some pleasure from the flotsam and jetsam of our increasingly fragmented experience.

The eclectic contents of the book itself testify to this miscellaneous mood. The mixum-gatherum of Baudrillard memories include everything from A to Z, and in no particular order: Alfa Romeos, the Antarcctica, AIDS, bureaucracy, Borges, the Berlin Wall, Jean Baudrillard, Catholicism, cats, California, cloud formation, DNA, dogs, Foucault, feminism, French fashions, Lech Walesa, Lacan, leukemia, mattresses, mud wrestling, memorials, Palermo, pornography, the Pope, snow, Stevie Wonder and Alexander Zinoviev. The list, as is obvious, is arbitrary. I could begin or end anywhere. And that's precisely the sense you get from Cool Memories. Cool to the point of
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cynicism. Though it is, to be fair, a cynicism turned on upon itself. A thanatos of self-torment and self-deflation. Like when he lays into the Parisian cult of the philosopher, having just let us know that the former French Prime Minister, Laurent Fabius, had invited the author himself and other celebrated French intellectuals to an after-dinner think-in about the need for political vision. One gets the uneasy impression that once the world has been americanized, nothing really matters any more. Everything becomes weightless, unbearably light, non-committal. Life itself becomes a quotation - to quote Baudrillard quoting Borges quoting one of his fictional quotes.

It is true that the author does express his dislike of the new culture of 'air-conditioned intelligence'. But the dislike is no longer grounded on any principle or political commitment. Principles and grounds have gone out the window - along with metaphysics, god, Marxism, morality and the human subject. The operative mood in these memories - whose only real sequential order derives from the fact that the five sets of entries are recorded every October over a five year period - is one of loss. Slippage. Absence. Dispersal. Reflections of homo absconditus.

The author himself likes to call this postmodern mood 'melancholia'. The kind of after-taste you might get from a Marguerite Duras or Thomas Pynchon novel; or a film by David Lynch or Peter Greenaway. I'm not sure that 'melancholy' isn't too heavy a word for what Baudrillard is at. It's more like a brilliantined necrophilia - an extraordinarily talented mind feeding off its own bitter-sweet angoisse. Baudrillard's description of driving in California serves as an apt metaphor for the book itself: "Gliding along the road that runs beside the coast in a black Porsche is like penetrating slowly into the inside of your own body".

The New York Times has hailed Jean Baudrillard as a 'sharp-shooting lone ranger of the post-Marxist left'. More like Custer after his last stand.