Understanding Media Users
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From Theory to Practice

Tony Wilson
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Research exemplars in chapters 6 and 9 draw selectively on empirical material published earlier in New Media and Society and Tourist Studies.
Informed by my nomadic higher education research and teaching experience in Asia, Australia, and the UK, *Understanding Media Users* offers readers a philosophically rooted guide to audience studies which have emerged over the last quarter of a century. In chapter 1 I discuss European (Structuralist) and US (Effects) audience theory and dismiss both as irredeemably determinist. We respond to screens not as passive objects pushed around by greater forces but as active subjects critical and creative in our comprehension of screen content (see Wilson, 2004).

Media users are no “homogenized,” “indistinguishable” mass (Zhong and Wang, 2006: 26). Researching “ordinary people’s interpretative activities” (Livingstone, 2004: 75) we need to hear their particular justification for interpreting film or cellphone narratives in the way they do. Understanding screen content is a rational *process* which takes time. What are the psychological and social conditions enabling our success? Investigating media use must be “process-oriented rather than result-oriented, interpretive rather than explanatory” (Ang, 1990: 240). Our search is for the underlying universal structure of responses to cinema, soap opera, cyberspace, and cellphone (a *phenomenology* of perception), not for media stimuli causing passive reactions (*positivism*).

From chapter 2 we seek a route through what has become known (somewhat diffusively) as “active audience” theory. The phrase “active audience” has become part of the “shared knowledge” (Roscoe et al., 1995: 88) of media studies. I relate UK work examining screen responses as the viewer’s final judgment on a text to wider European reader reception theory which considers the process of arriving at that judgment. Oddly, British communication studies has been less “sensitive” to the enriching “difference of European ideas” (Nightingale, 1996: 108) than the US school of consumer studies whose contribution I discuss in detail (chapters 7 and 8).
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In writing these chapters my goal has been to present audience studies to emerge with a clearly focused claim deriving from media theory after structuralism, an account informed by the latter’s philosophical rival, phenomenology. Seeing is immediately interpretative of its subject on screen. Looking initiates our always culturally located perception of pages, people, or programs as Asian or Caucasian, comprehensible content or enigmatic event, contestable or consensus gaining…. Sadly, there are no cross-culturally given uninterpreted “raw” data.

Nonetheless, there is a universal process of “reading the screen” at the heart of audience response everywhere. For media literacy is ludic – a term which here denotes the customary practice of viewing, not the counter-factual engagement with programs “as raw material with which to fantasize” (Liebes and Katz, 1993: x). As competent audiences, we are both “consumers of the spectacle” and “players in the game” (Ross and Nightingale, 2003: 147) of Big Brother.

The model of media use we shall be pursuing asserts it to be a continually future-oriented goal-focused play-like activity. In “everyday meaning-formation” (Hermes and Dahlgren, 2006: 259) we project and position content in television programs and web pages. Chapter 6 shows the theory’s application to understanding cellphone use. Following a discussion of branding and consumer research guided by phenomenology, my final chapter draws on the model to offer an empirically responsive close analysis of audiences as consumer-citizens reading (creatively, critically) content on television and tourist websites.1 Almost two decades ago researchers argued that the challenging task lying before them was to “open up the black box hiding the specific social-psychological processes behind and below the general process of reception” (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990: 232). Those processes are studied cross-culturally below.

Making Sense of/in Media Use: Beyond Accumulating Audience Responses

Media research is quantitative and qualitative: we count and conceptualize screen use. Qualitative active audience investigation is both consequent upon and criticizes structuralist study of responses to (principally) film. In structuralism’s successor, reactions (positive or negative) to screen content are considered as creatively drawing on the viewer’s culture, primarily as a gendered and socially located media user with a particular ethnicity and
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This approach is generally regarded as initiated by Brunsdon and Morley in the early 1980s at the University of Birmingham UK Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. It can be named “active audience” theory by virtue of being understood as a reaction against 1970s structuralist accounts of screen narrative as wholly determining viewer response – as excluding significance for local negotiation of meaning.

Understanding Media Users discusses approaches to audiences which maintain that viewers actively interpret content, a perspective to be distinguished not only from structuralist media theory but from passive audience “effects studies.” Effects studies consist of research conceptually articulated from a predominantly US behaviorist perspective. In these accounts, akin to “bullet” or “hypodermic needle” theory of media content’s mechanically pushing viewers’ behavior, events on screen are a two-dimensional cause of three-dimensional consequences. Media stimulate a passive response not mediated by viewer reflection.

Active audience theory has been consistently criticized as indeterminate (Roscoe et al., 1995). What do we mean when we (favorably) characterize an audience as “active”? In answering this question we can turn to the philosophical psychology of phenomenology and its literary offspring, reader reception theory. Here, interest focuses on the media user’s activity of “reading” screen narrative. Research perceives the audience’s making sense of content as a structured cognitive – sometimes very expressive – process. Emphasizing the viewer’s achievement in making a program intelligible, such hermeneutic (Devereux, 2003: 96) media analysis asks the question: what are the enabling conditions of successfully coming to understand screen text? In answering we focus upon cross-cultural consumption of television or Internet.

Taking phenomenology on board, media user theory enables the multi-site research exemplars set out in this book. We can integrate active audience theory’s political emphasis on audience perceptions of their “positioning” by the screen and philosophy’s account of the cognitive activity with which “readers” meet such alignment of viewers by texts. This reading process is hermeneutic – media users render cellphone and cyberspace narrative meaningful.

Active audience theory’s silence (a discursive debit) on how viewers actually achieve understanding is addressed in phenomenology’s thesis that perceiving screen content involves a structured process of thought, albeit often swift. In our “hermeneutical relationship” (Nyre, 2007: 29) with known media we anticipate and actualize meaning, seeking coherence.
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Implicitly or explicitly, audience studies appropriate this philosophy of mind to develop a “genre-based theory of interpretation” (Radway, 1991: 10) in which texts are read as instantiating types.

We can ask sociological questions about the construction of media knowledge: how do people arrive at the cultural horizons from which program, phone, and web page content is conceptualized and concretized or read in particular ways? Why are these powerful conceptual perspectives sometimes contested, forming the focus of cultural struggle? Equally, we can raise psychological issues: how do those horizons of understanding constrain (Bird, 2003: 167) as well as creatively enable the process of understanding media? The goal pursued here will be integrating answers to these important questions in media user studies.

Mapping Media Understanding:
Using an Inductive or Interpretative Method?

As Morrison (2003: 124) and others have indicated, research arguing for widely applicable conclusions about TV or Internet use based on a limited number of responses to questionnaires (or inductive reasoning) can find it difficult to justify such generalization, “distinctive” or otherwise (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999: 11). Instead, seeking a universal cognitive core at the heart of media experience, Understanding Media Users discusses ways of interpreting people’s reactions to content. Underlying variety we can locate a shared or cross-cultural process by reference to which we may account for emerging difference. For “qualitative reception analysis needs to be placed in a broader theoretical framework” (Ang, 1996: 137).

Far from responses to the screen being exclusively explicable in terms of the latter’s content, active audience studies emphasize viewers’ cultural and social experience as a constructive resource supporting discrete responses to TV program or web page. Conceptualizing reading as a meaning-making process, hermeneutics investigates how media users succeed in understanding narrative on TV and Internet often widely diverse in their cultural content.

Our inquiry into how we make sense of what we see on screen is guided by the insight from phenomenology that audience achievement of intelligibility requires cognitive activity: from the moment at which we commence viewing we entertain informed expectations or “projections” (Gadamer, 1975: 224) of textual meaning which our reading then shows to be accurate – or
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otherwise. For in media reception, viewers draw on their established “horizons of understanding” (ibid.: 217) or wider experience of narrative patterns as “media templates” (Kitzinger, 2000), positions of knowledgeable advantage allowing them to anticipate character development and events. The latter may or may not emerge as actually occurring.

This conceptual context of comprehension or “anticipation and retrospection” (Lury, 2005: 95) in looking at the screen sets the terms of media literacy (Livingstone, 2007a). Audiences seek (and sometimes fail) to integrate confirmed conjectural projections of television program or web page content in a synthesizing “hermeneutic circle of understanding” (Gadamer, 1975: 167), relating elements of a text to its perceived entirety. Likewise, consumers construct or “stitch” together (Ruddock, 2007: 130) coherent narratives of television or online marketing in their accounts of achieved anticipation.

Qualitative empirical research testing such communications or consumer reception theory is often conducted in focus groups whose participants discuss their responses to particular cellphone, television, or Internet narratives (e.g., adverts). Contributions confirm or contradict and frequently enrich an emerging philosophical psychology of media use – or media user theory.

Media user theory builds upon the insight from uses and gratifications analyses that people derive intrinsic and instrumental satisfaction from their screen-related activity. Drawing on philosophically attuned reception psychology, the theory presented below holds that activity to be at its core an interpretative play-like (ludic) process integrating past, present, and future cultural moments. Instrumental media use constrains immersion in this “game” (although one of my students argued that a Google search could be a source of absorbing intrinsic pleasure). We note the emphasis on uses and gratifications theory in Chinese media studies journals over the last thirty years and the call to integrate this work with “reception analysis” (Zhou, 2006: 129).

Notes

1 Like Seiter in her guiding text Television and New Media Audiences (1999: 5) most of my examples will be drawn from projects I have conducted with others.

2 Barker calls for audience research to go “beyond accumulation” (2006) of studies to develop a theoretical model of our media response. Seeking the psychological structure of “understanding” as a continuing process focused on screen
content, *Understanding Media Users* addresses this project by drawing on Heideggerian and later hermeneutic phenomenology. This may not be the theory transcending the piecemeal study which Barker had in mind (and the mistakes are mine), but I am grateful that he signaled the need for a “fore-concept” of understanding “understanding.”

3 A distinction between “intrinsic” and “instrumental” media use is made by others (e.g., Moyal, 1992: 53). In regard to phone use, the former (calls for pleasure) can include “all intimate discussion and exchange,” while the latter (calls for a purpose) involves “calls of a functional nature” (ibid.). It is clear that a call can shift from the first to the second category (e.g., an intimate conversation which turns to resolving a “household crisis”). Likewise, a dutiful phone call may be continued for enjoyment. Media use is fundamentally immersive, analogous to a game in absorbing one in another space and time: functional media use remains tethered to here and now.
How do we respond to cellphone, film, Internet, television screens? Are there fundamental differences in our reactions to format and technology—or a core similarity? How do we cross cultures in understanding content? What is the relationship between the psychology of individual “readings” and the sociology of responses by groups, genders, generations? How can “scientific” audience research advance beyond accumulating data—what is “progress” in media user studies?

Addressing these questions throughout this volume, I begin with a short new media narrative of everyday cellphone use in a complex Southeast Asian city. Its content will be easily recognized by many among today’s traveling academics and students (the few Australians in the large undergraduate and postgraduate classes I teach in Sydney are far outnumbered by those who have joined us from nations overseas). To others this story will seem more distantly located, though its moments of involved absorption and anticipation of screen text we shall argue are global. For the purpose of this brief book is to gain insight into the underlying universal structure of media use.

This short narrative was recounted to me and another researcher talking to people visiting a transnational telecommunications company customer support center at a vast shopping mall in central Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s capital city. (The hybrid name of the center’s location—Berjaya Times Square—signals the status which some have given Kuala Lumpur as the world’s most global or postmodernist metropolis by virtue of its multicultural Asian-Western architecture, food, religious expression, and population). Many of these customers had come to the center to ask about their cellphone use or (as in the case of our story’s source) to register their post-paid account in response to new legislation (see an extended description in chapter 6).

In this narrative a Chinese Malaysian middle-aged woman (or “aunt” in Malaysian English) tells us about the everyday but engaging pleasure
she derives from the cellphone’s ability to immerse her interest, with its incoming messages particularly distracting her from the tumultuous city through which she travels by bus. Let us call her (fictitiously) Ai Wei. Her times of passive absorption, of focusing on the phone, it is important to be aware, are simultaneously moments of active anticipation. Electronically engaged, she enthusiastically expects its narrative.

Never merely concentrated on the immediate present (caller numbers), Ai Wei’s immersion in screen data is always also an informed future-focused concern with the associated call content she would receive by clicking on her cellphone pad. As the philosopher Heidegger might well have said had wireless communication existed in the last century, her absorption is continually fore-structured by anticipation or fore-sight: she has an always present fore-concept (1962) of messages from “familiar numbers” as “safe to access.” Displaying an interpretative understanding of her digital-human environment, Ai Wei tells us in everyday words which need to be addressed by theory, “when I look at the number and I’m not familiar, normally I wouldn’t pick it up” because unknown callers are likely to be “weird [people]” who “give you those noises.”

In her cellphone use, this Malaysian Chinese aunt blurs the public-private distinction which has governed much media research conducted either outside or within the home (see Gauntlett and Hill, 1999: 4). For within the “architectonic structure” (García-Montes et al., 2006: 72) of the surrounding city Ai Wei links with domesticity, her (spatiotemporally) extended family. Receiving those calls or texts she chooses to hear or read, Ai Wei pursues (like their sender) a coherent meaning for their content. Absorbing rather than alienating her, a message can enlighten her life: “when I receive an SMS from my niece” who is able to use “all the short forms and even insert a picture,” “it makes my day.” Considering her subjective narrative in more abstract terms, we shall see in subsequent chapters that its underlying structure of perception, prediction, positing, and pleasurable acquisition of appropriate meaning characterizes audience activity widely. We need to confirm such theory (or at least fail to falsify it) by referring to everyday accounts of media use beyond questionnaires. Screen content can prompt painful responses.

Our Times Square interviewee ignores caller numbers she does not recognize: she resists responding, anticipating that she would hear “weird” sounds rather than comfortably familiar communication. Ai Wei reduces (“deconstructs”) the former as dehumanized “noises” rather than meaningful messages and distances herself from such contact. However, as
someone who herself writes SMS, she identifies with her niece’s processing of communicative intent, evaluating her literacy favorably: “it makes my day.” A less caring aunt could have displayed apathy.

Ai Wei has a complex response to her cellphone call and messaging content, appropriating some items, alienated by others. Appreciative but equally analytical, she resembles a fan of phoning, “moving fluidly” between “proximity and distance” from the material (Jenkins, 1992: 65).

Audiences actively interpret screen content. From a sociological point of view, using media across the world draws upon people’s different cultural perspectives on events seen and heard. Muslim Malays characteristically do not regard television’s religious images of Islamic practice in the same way as Caucasian Christians. We shall see Chinese New Year interpreted differently.

But the psychological process of our coming to understand stories has the same structure everywhere. Drawing on our background knowledge of media forms, patterns, or types, we identify narratives we hear or see unfolding: we anticipate and construct an account of their meaning. Program content confirms or upsets our preceding concepts (or stereotypes). This model of understanding we shall see is fundamental to integrating the study of media users.

In the pages which follow we trace the evolution of insights into media reception through the last thirty years of audience investigation – from European structuralism and North American effects studies to considering viewers as active, and from reader reception research to new media user theory. This is an important path to follow through communication studies linking “questions of signification” on screens to “questions of subjectivity” (MacCabe, 1985: 6) amidst audiences.

At different stages on this route we can look sideways and evaluate environmentally, weighing up from an “audience perspective” other aspects of media studies such as narrative theory or the political economy of content production. Moreover, at the conclusion of this discursive excursion, I shall show that knowing how we “read” media enables us to gain insight into a wide range of screen-using activity, from successfully advertising Coca-Cola on television in an Islamic majority nation to Asian tourists enjoyably engaged in reading Western websites.

So how do we draw on culture to construct an identity for screen content and self concept? I maintain throughout this book that we react to films, programs, or web pages in ways which are globally (psychologically) alike and locally (sociologically) particular. The cultural identity I am proposing for ourselves as media users is both fixed and fluid. The cognitive process at
play in our “production of knowledge” (MacCabe, 1976: 10) from uncertain content on screen is structured mentally. We do not understand a program instantly, but rather aim at insight, gradually establishing it as a coherent story. But while this goal of comprehension is everywhere the same, the content with which we complete a media narrative draws its particular detail from the social context in which we achieve these acts of understanding.

Watching television, for instance, we universally anticipate events on screen or project (Gadamer, 1975: 224) narrative meaning (“they’ll marry!,” “they’ll split up!”): subsequently, we check our speculation as the story develops. But we perceive or construct that meaning from particular cultural perspectives (for instance, secular and spiritual “readings” of a TV marriage are distinct). Living lives of disparate dimensions within a multitude of social circumstances, we draw upon different stocks of knowledge or conceptual horizons of understanding (ibid.: 217) in classifying (fore-structuring), considering as coherent and consequently comprehending content.

Our knowledge of media narratives is not immediate. San Francisco, Sarawak, and Sydney audience responses to television are psychological processes following a similar cognitive path of expecting and establishing content. Assisted by literary theory and philosophy, I shall later map this global activity conceptually. But drawing on our culturally local interpretations of what we see, we develop varying (and sometimes strongly evaluative) accounts of a program’s events (“he’s a real Casanova!”/“he’s a real challenge to our Asian Values!”). In the chapters which follow, this global/local model of media(ted) perception will be constructed, engaged with, and extended as a story of media use. It will be shown to support studies of cellphone experience and marketing as well as analyses of critical citizens and consensual consumers in their varying responses to online journalism and e-tourism. But we turn now to consider earlier theory, some “mass communications dinosaurs” (Ruddock, 2007: 3) in Europe and the United States: “techno-determinist” (Ferguson, 1992: 72) structuralism and early effects studies.

**European Structuralism (1970s): Silent Subjects – Passive Audiences?**

In structuralist media theory of the 1970s the conjunction of cinematic screen and spectator reaction was represented as wholly determining
cause of an effect. Audience responses are constructed by the text. Passive audiences necessarily followed film politics. Spectators succumbed to ideology (or ideas serving the interests of the powerful): male chauvinist cinema effected sexist response. Structuralist study of the relationship between viewed and viewer reduced the latter to asocial atom acceding always to screen prescription: the “spectator must be placed in a position from which the image is regarded as primary” (MacCabe, 1976: 11).

Structuralist study of the visual and its effect on the viewer can be found in contemporary issues of the journal *Screen*, although as MacCabe noted the latter represented the voices of a “more general movement” (1985: 6) concerned with understanding signs and their communication of meaning. As we shall see, structuralist theory could never find a conceptual place for active media users: for these audiences did not merely absorb but rather independently evaluated screen narrative’s political positioning of its viewers.

The structuralist narrative of the viewing subject or cinematic spectator excludes from its model of the media recipient the latter’s past as a person in society. In this account, the “real reader is prefigured by, and coincides with, the ideal recipient the text posits for itself” (Robins, 1979: 363). That is, as mainstream film audiences, irrespective of our cultural background, we simply circulate the categories of worldly understanding to which we are “subjected” by the wide screen.

Structuralists evacuated from responses to media the spectator’s conscious cognitive processing of content over time. Our expectation and establishing of narrative is eliminated. Instead, reception of screen images is regarded as immediate. According to this delusory philosophy, when engaged by/with audio-visual texts, we are no longer people endowed with a capacity for creative thought and criticism emerging from experience but become instead conduits of cinematic ideology – capitalist, patriarchal, or otherwise. Audiences purchase a pass/ticket whose true cost is constraint: apparently escaping the mundane, they merely reproduce the forms of sociopolitical understanding presented on screen. In the seductive space and leisure time of the cinema, the latter alone is efficacious in a “productivity of meanings” (McDonnell and Robins, 1980: 194) supporting the status quo.

The film’s “structure,” its particular inflection of ideology or political persuasion through storytelling, determines audience deliberation on its events. According to structuralists, we are passive recipients of cinematic imagery, the “loaded” representations of femininity and masculinity, ethnicity and social class with which its narratives allocate and deny power: the screen “puts in place an experience for a subject whom it includes”
A Passive Audience?

(Heath, 1973: 11). While cinema narrates events, the unseen spectating “subject” in the dark of the auditorium is acknowledged and absorbed in the story’s “articulation in which it is, in fact, defined” (MacCabe, 1974: 17). As attentive audience, playing its part, we wait and witness, acceding to film’s sometimes spectacular address to those watching.

Structuralists argued, then, that cinema positioned spectators ideologically, passively and politically: audience cognition followed authored content. Acknowledging our place as (no more than) appropriate addressees of the screen text on display, we learn all we (should) wish to know. Acquiescing in this promised “supra-positional omniscience” (MacCabe, 1976: 18), we absorb an ideologically accredited insight, a ticketed totality of world view. The audience willingly adopts the cinema-defined philosophical and physical position of screen spectator. But, sinking into their seats, reduced to their role as cinema-defined viewers, people’s wider experience is eliminated as a source of knowledge and understanding.

We become comfortable film enthusiasts: but the precondition of an easy and untroubled structuralist spectatorship is not only the purchase of a cinema ticket but our uncritical recruitment to the reactionary politics circulating on screen. As well behaved spectators we respond appropriately to movie narratives. But in our silent gaze and recognition of large screen authority we are appropriated by dominant cinema as spokespersons for the problematic, for concepts of the social world which are challengeable outside the doors of the movie theatre.

Considered within the structuralist account of being a spectator, when we listen to the detective Petersen in *Mildred Pierce*, we are nothing more or less than addressees of that patriarchal policeman on screen. With skeptical experience absent from our memory, our thought is taken into (his) custody. Now categorically unable to consider alternatives, we presume without question the authority of the police department: its status on screen is articulated in the film’s visual privileging (e.g., through upward tilting camera shots) of Petersen as embodying justice and truth. Confronted by this dominant/dominating discourse of a powerful physique, the spectator is “fixed in his [sic] position securely by the reality of the image” (Brewster and MacCabe, 1974: 9). Construing the world in these cinematic terms of masculinity, our now absolute assumption of male authority underwrites our judgments about Mildred in particular and women more widely.

Science fiction movies primarily define this world rather than an alternative universe. When a story returns (us) safely to the “normality” of events in small town America after the vanquished Martian invasion, as structuralism’s
spectatorial “subjects” we unproblematically share that cinematic definition (delusion?) of security. From the analytical perspective of such Screen theory in the seventies, we are as an audience separated from individual (idiosyncratic?) memories which could suggest a different perception of rural tranquility.

In the cinema, we are said by structuralism to be “interpellated” as spectating subjects: a powerful “text ensures the position of the subject in a relation of dominant specularity” (MacCabe, 1974: 12) to film narrative. The camera both constructs and curtails our apparent omniscience as spectators knowledgeable of events on screen from motive to outcome. For with our own experience elided or forgotten in our position as textually “subjected” audience, we are entrapped. We see society simply from the film’s ideological perspective, insulated from critical (e.g., socialist) alternatives.

Audiences are thereby fixed in a position of “pure specularity” (ibid.) while engaging with the “classic realist texts” of the mainstream movie house. These films “work hard to disguise the evidence of artifice” (Ruddock, 2007: 122) or technical construction. In our attending exclusively to the screen, its representing of extra-cinematic reality seems obviously valid. Where our messy mundane lives are absent, there can be no evidence for doubting a story’s implicit politics.

Writ large on overpowering screens, an already socially dominant “symbolic system” is “imposed on the human animal in its construction into a subject” (Brewster, 1975: 6, emphasis in the original). At the door of the cinema we hand in any alternative conceptual currency we may possess – to be collected (if not forgotten) on the way out. In 1970s Screen analyses, cinema was separated from the society in which it was consumed. The viewer has no voice, becoming instead a silent subject. Theory of spectatorship was rendered autonomous from the actual audience: there is a neglect of historical specificity (McDonnell and Robins, 1980: 176–7, 202).

In this symbolic “petrification of the spectator” (MacCabe, 1974: 24) we are constrained to think the politics wherein cinema positions us: our speculative thoughts cannot move outside the categories or “mental machinery” of a mainstream consensus. Film incorporates “subject positions binding individuals into the production of certain forms of totality” (Brewster et al., 1976: 115). We look but lose sight of the progressive. Only radical Marxist film (known also as non-realist cinema) through presenting the audience with contradictory accounts of the social world is said to be able to prompt us to consider the tensions within capitalist ideology. When an
“identification is broken, becomes difficult to hold,” “we grasp in one and the same moment both the relations that determine that identity and our relation to its representation” (MacCabe, 1976: 25).

In 1976 MacCabe reconstructed his earlier structuralism [Screen 15(2) 1974] in which he “made the subject the effect of the structure (the subject is simply the sum of positions allocated to it)” (1976: 25). For all political intents and purposes, cinematic narration and consumption were identical. Instead, drawing on a linguistic model of the relationship between spectator and screen, he now no longer assimilates them. “Text and reader” are “separate” (1976: 25). In this turn to poststructuralist theory, MacCabe frees the audience from its subjection to a causally determining textual structure: reception does not replicate cinematic recitation of ideology. He looks to conceptually “focus on the position of the (active) speaking subject within the utterance” (1976: 12). As he later wrote in reference to his views, by “calling me a structuralist my opponents revealed their ignorance” (1985: 30).

With discourse we become interested in the dialectical relation between speaker and language in which language always already offers a position to the speaker and yet, at the same time, the act of speaking may itself displace those positions. (MacCabe, 1976: 12)

Cinema’s call to spectators to position themselves in “binding” (MacCabe, 1985: 10) identification with its representations can be resisted. Writing about an actively creative and critical audience capable of both alignment and antagonism towards politically “contradictory positions” (MacCabe, 1976: 12) in mainstream film texts now becomes possible within MacCabe’s radically redesigned model of the media user. He concludes that is a “question of analyzing a film within a determinate social moment so that it is possible to determine what identifications will be made and by whom.” Society comes to the cinema: “we have to consider the relation between reader and text in its historical specificity” (MacCabe, 1976: 25, 24).

The spectator’s historical specificity – her or his culturally informed and informing experience – indeed needed to enter the abstract world of Screen structuralism. Avowedly Marxist, its high formalist theory circulated untouched by everyday reality. As Morley later remarked, the “problem with much of Screen’s work” is its theorists’ “unjustifiable conflation” of the political position to which they perceive a film addressing its message with that of the actual “social subject” (1980: 159). Cinema’s intended and real
audiences are conflated. But many of us can think – for example – beyond the assumptions of patriarchal power to which much film subscribes as self-evident. Albeit mundane, everyday thought is not always contained within the profit-focused categories of the capitalist screen.

Film theorists may tease out of a mainstream text on screen a particular perception of “normal” behavior which many of its eventual spectators can share. Narrative cinema frequently presumes a successful heterosexual romance brings its assumed audience pleasure. But richly diverse three-dimensional human spectators will always “exceed” 1970s Screen contributors’ reductive one-dimensional statement of their “political petrification” by film. Real media users must always be more than their abstract definition by structuralists as subscribers to suspicious ideology. Without a specific knowledge of signs signifying status they will not be able to recognize the ways in which the screen’s address can “hail” them to serve the already powerful. If in our social capacity as spectators seated before the screen we are reduced to being merely one-dimensional ideological implants, how can we recognize from remembered experience the presence of police in a movie as an iconic imperative signaling the authoritative source of patriarchal pronouncements within whose terms we are required to think?

Recruitment to reactionary ideas requires that the conscript can understand the cultural signifiers of meaning – the local language – in which the message is encoded. The audience’s acceding to film’s furthering of a view of the masculine as overwhelmingly potent presumes their ability to recollect particular discursive ways in which cinema signals power (e.g., images of fast cars and fantastic residences). If she loses contact in the darkness of the movie house with earlier experience, the amnesiac addressee of film can no longer function to fulfill a “subject position.”

Powerfully performing global ideology (ill-supported belief implicated in illicit power) requires supplementing by local knowledge. Spectators are conceptualized by structuralist analysis as no more than political positions, as without access to mundane memory when facing film. But deprived of their capacity to recall culturally specific experience, audiences lack a knowledge of signs enabling them to acquiesce in dominant cinema’s audio-visual assertion of capitalist consumerism as “natural” or “normal,” as constituting an everyday reality without alternative plausible possibility.

Cinema’s ideological positioning of its audience requires particular memories from spectators, their recollecting culturally specific modes of conveying power. In Mildred Pierce, Petersen needs to be perceived as a detective if his performance is to accrue power for patriarchal structures of
justice. If recognition rests upon remembering, we are necessarily always more than simply defined political adresses of those who seek and secure status on screen. As media users, we exceed their categories of service. Allowing audiences access to earlier experience must be written into accounting for their alignment by screen politics. Poststructuralism’s argument (advanced below) is that memory, as well as allowing an audience’s passive acquiescing in cinematic authority, can be a source of active protest.

**Structuralism as excluding audience experience**

Structuralism argued for a limited account of viewing pleasure: this derived from cinema’s (alleged) capacity to resolve spectators’ psychic conflicts. Watching film on a large screen, the audience uncritically adopted the cinematic text’s apparently coherent view of the world and forgot its own contradictory and fragmented experience. “What is politically important about this textual organization is that it removes the spectator from the realm of contradiction” (MacCabe, 1976: 21). Here, enjoyment rested on amnesia.

Identifying with James Bond, male spectators displaced a “real life” disjunction between aspiration and actuality, between cultural “ought” and constrained capacity. As cinematic audiences, forgetting “constitutive contradictions” (ibid.: 27) they celebrated instant integration of masculine fantasy and fulfillment. Film accomplished a “fixation of the reader in (ideological) position as a unified and coherent subject, the apparent source (as narrative agent) of the text’s meaning” (Robins, 1979: 367).

Fundamentally radical in rethinking response studies, the media user research which followed structuralism posited a distance between the cultural perspectives of audiences and those available on screen. From viewers’ differing immersion in ethnic, gender, generational, and social class experience there emerges a wide range of interpretative insights – with media users “reading” narrative events in a variety of ways. For critical cultural theorists succeeding structuralism, where text conflicts with experience, the latter is not forgotten but used by an audience to forge an “interrogation” of content to the point of rejection.

**Two concepts of “structure”**

Structuralism, then, regarded media users as absorbing rather than actively responding to screen narrative’s political proposition(ing). But as intellectual
inquiry it had an additional deficiency. It focused on the structure of the product (the text), ignoring the equally structured process wherein audiences achieve understanding of narrative content in viewing. Structuralists concerned themselves with the storytelling forms of films or television programs. They argued that these narratives sought to resolve underlying social oppositions (e.g., conflicts between the benign and the bad, good and evil) or were covert conservative arguments for the status quo.

However, media use is also a cognitively structured process. The meaning of a program is developed by viewers as a particular “product of certain shared systems of signification” (Eagleton, 1983: 107). Audiences recognize a story as exemplifying a type or genre: they are thereby enabled to anticipate likely developments and seek confirmation of expectations. Watching television, accessing the web, we draw upon “frames of cultural assumption” (ibid.: 122) like a knowledge of narrative patterns and how they characteristically occur.

By which groups of media users is such cultural awareness held in common? How is it drawn upon by viewers to secure intelligibility for a particular screen content? What subjective – yet structured – processes occur when media users bring knowledge (e.g., of film genre) to bear upon a single text, seeing it from a wider aesthetic perspective or horizon of understanding?

When structuralist theory refers to “laws of the mind” (Eagleton, 1983: 109) its concern is not to posit patterns within an audience’s pursuit of program meaning: for this process is regarded as “random, untheorizable” (ibid.: 114). Rather, these “laws” are to be found governing the product or conclusion of that mental event, as a less than explicit aspect of the established story. For instance, analyzing a narrative can yield the discovery that it has necessarily incorporated an (allegedly) universally occurring antagonism or opposition between agents of order (good) and disorder (evil).

Subsequent reader reception theory, on the other hand, seeks to “lay bare the very structures of consciousness”: it asks about the shape of the media user’s regular mental activity which makes understanding of texts possible “in the first place” (Eagleton, 1983: 56). Such philosophically sensitive psychology is concerned in studying audiences with discerning the intersubjective (or universal) structure of the informed thought processes through which media users make meaning. This patterned cognitive activity precedes (but is responsible for) the final product—an intelligible text on screen. Structuralism, on the other hand, ignores our understanding narrative, the “actual speaking, writing, listening and reading of concrete social individuals” (ibid.: 114).
US “mass communication research has been dominated by an effects-orientation.” “This concern with media effects is guided by a one-way model of mass communication … it fit [sic] well with the existing concerns of mass communication scholars.” Studies of “media effects are empirical, quantitative social science investigations”: one “cannot accuse these scholars of assuming that media effects are usually positive for the audience individuals under study” (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995: viii–ix).

The effects paradigm (or widely adopted theory) assumes media and their audiences are connected in a basic cause-and-effect scenario (Bryant and Thompson, 2002: 19). For instance, Bandura argues (with considerable intellectual intensity if not complete intelligibility) while presenting his social cognitive theory of mass communication that he is providing an account of media “determinants” operating in a “causal structure of factors” (2002: 139) in respect of their viewers. Both Bryant and Thompson (2002) and Lowery and DeFleur (1995) discuss in detail the developmental path followed by the effects model of media causing audience behavior: they provide major and widely available statements of the approach. I selectively cite their case studies in our critical focus on the theory.

In media effects research, strategies of investigation have been based on a model of inquiry adopted from physical science (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995: 2). However, the model against which this media research measures itself methodologically is only one possible account of scientific investigative activity. This positivist view of how inquiry is conducted defines the route to a successful research outcome as follows: when (1) events are seen and (2) highly correlated (ideally, constantly conjoined) statistically this is (3) sufficient to assert their causal connection.

Within this influential (but erroneous) account of scientific procedure which has for decades governed the effects program of exploring audiences, the focus of investigation must be observable. For instance, Lowery and DeFleur describe an experiment on cinema spectators in which electrodes and mechanical devices measured visible physiological changes (e.g., in breathing rates and sweating) as “indices of emotional arousal” (1995: 26). Preoccupied by studying events which can be seen (and heard), effects investigations are often of negative media content and (allegedly) consequent adverse audience behavior. Bandura’s well-known