

Towards the construction of new audiences. 'Fictions' in contemporary media

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Abstract

In this paper I aim to work with a concept that I defined as “fictions” or better, “Hegemonic fictions”. The concept of fiction is based not on a “lie”, but on a hegemonic representation that media produce and reproduce in every show, game, interaction or presentation. That is why I chose to call them fictions: the ways through which media build hegemonic representations about everything that *should* matter in a specific moment of time and history.

I identified four different fictions and, through them, I propose to analyze different aspects of both the contemporary media and their audiences. The first one is the fiction of *choice*. The analysis that I made of this fiction is based on the diversity of available electronic devices and the *real* possibilities that audiences have to choose. The second one is the fiction of *participation*. The emphasis in the so called “decision of the audience” is built upon a new fiction: we do not get to choose who participates on a show, a survey or a contest but we are summoned to “vote” or answer questions in order to construct a feeling that we are *participating*. The third fiction is the one of the *objectivity*. The aim of this fiction is to analyze the operations through which media present their sayings, images, news and opinions as “objective”. In the same line, the fourth fiction is about the reception stage. I do not sustain that reception is a fiction but I will analyze the variables and the mediations that exist between media messages and the audiences who receive, read, write and listen to those messages.

New audiences and new media seem to be changing and developing at the same time in the same space. We aim to question the naturalization of the different and varied relationships between media and audiences in order to present possible new approaches that might lead to new questions and researches.

The research in which this article is based was financed by Conicet and project PICT 2010-1913.

Key words:

Media- Audiences-Fiction-Representation- Participation

1. Introduction

“Audiences do not see only what they want to see, since a message (or program) is not simply a window to the world, but a construction” (Morley, 1992: 21). Morley, in his extract of the introduction to *Television, audiences and cultural studies*, produced a perfect synthesis of the difficulties and complexities that both media and audiences entail for their analysts. Audiences do not see only what they want to see, on one side. That means that there is a group of variables that intervene between audiences and the so called “reality”. On the other side, a message (as a general way of defining any media product) is a construction of that “reality”. In sum, the fact that media *construct* a way of connecting with the world and its events, can never be more than a representation. Stuart Hall stated that to represent is to put something in the place of something else (1981) or better, representing is a political action that involves different economic, political, cultural and social variables that compose a representation in one way and not in another.

Audiences, construction, representations: three key concepts that will structure this paper. The objective of this paper is to present a conceptualization about audiences and media in the light of the new devices and strategies available nowadays. The objective is to articulate several researches in a structure that might clarify ways through which media and audiences establish different and dynamic relationships.

The hypothesis that will organize this paper claims that media demand different actions and behaviors from audiences and, as a consequence of these demands, new audiences are being built. These new audiences, in the media ecosystem in which they live (Martín-Barbero, 2003), are supposed to know, recognize and use many devices. From mobile phones to tablets or game consoles, the demands on audiences are rising. That is one of the keys of the hypothesis of this paper. Demanded audiences, constructed representations. Between them we find several mediating factors that configure representations and audiences in different ways.

Through both content and text analysis I aim to present what I defined as “Hegemonic Fictions”. The identification of what I called fiction appeared after different series of interviews in the last ten years of research on media and audiences (Duek, 2006, 2011 and 2012). Testimonies about reception, preferences, favorite television shows, computer games and newspapers, lead me to inquire further about the ways in which media represents the world to their audiences. New ways of participating and

interacting with media were identified in the testimonies as a “plus”; credibility was considered almost as a synonym of “objectivity” and was related to certain journalists, celebrities or politicians; reception appeared repeatedly as an independent stage in which subjects did “whatever they could or wanted” in front of that program or message.

In short, I found in the interviews I made to both children and adults that different strategies that media use to represent the world appeared to be naturalized by audiences who considered them nearly transparent¹. As the objective of those interviews was to characterize the relationship between media and audiences, all the testimonies gathered demanded a reorganization of what was being said about it. That was when I came up with the idea of “Hegemonic fictions”.

The interviews were made following different research questions. The use that I am going to make of them here will be panoramic: many statements of my informants will help me to produce a synthesis of the characteristics of the “hegemonic fictions”. That is why I propose this article as both a balance and a synthesis of many years of research; I will present many different and partial conclusions that will frame my own questions and interests.

I have been working with children and adults for a long time and the results of my many interviews and exchanges with them allow me to present here a conceptual organization and an analysis of everything that I have collected. I am not going to use the testimonies as the main input of the paper but as a frame from which I organized the presentation of the fictions.

The first part of the paper will be destined to characterize and define what I call “Hegemonic fictions” and the second one will be occupied by the four different “hegemonic fictions” I identified: 1) the fiction of participation, 2) the fiction of objectivity, 3) the fiction of choice and 4) the fiction on the reception stage.

Through these four “hegemonic fictions” I aim to present a reflection about media, audiences and new practices in a new ecosystem that will very likely arise new questions, discussions and approaches.

2. Hegemony, fiction and common sense: Towards the construction of hegemonic fictions

Hall (1981) identifies naturalization as one of the inherent strategies that media use in order to build their representations. Naturalization, as a major political and

¹ The interviews were made between 2005 and 2012 to both children and adults about their relationship with different devices and media in the context of a research financed by Conicet and the University of Buenos Aires. More than thirty adults and almost seventy children were interviewed in depth for the purpose of the research (see Duek, 2010 and 2012).

ideological operation, involves media producers and media audiences. Redundancy and the use of what Hall identifies as “common sense” (the least common of the senses, he claims ironically) are two of the tools that contribute to the reproduction of capitalism. Reading Gramsci (1992), Hall claims that common sense is the residue of a consensual wisdom, which tends to classify the world in simple but meaningful terms. Common sense does not require reasoning, logical argumentation nor thoughts: we can spontaneously use it. Through common sense we cannot learn how things *are*, we can only discover where things act and fit in the existent system. Finally, common sense is formed by remains and traces of previous ideological systems, that is, it has both a content and a history (see Williams, 1977).

The identification of the content and the history of common sense is related to a materialist perspective: it is not possible to produce an analysis without considering the material and symbolic conditions in which that analysis was produced. Nor can we discard the limitations and possibilities that each research and approach has in the imaginary boundaries of Social Sciences.

Naturalization and common sense are two major dimensions of the contemporary media ecosystem. Hall presented common sense quoting Gramsci and it is perhaps in the Italian philosopher where we might find a conceptual entrance to the “hegemonic fictions”.

Hegemony, claimed Gramsci overcoming some Marxist definitions, is a composition of both domination and consensus. The combination and articulation of domination and consensus unveiled a new approach to culture analysis and politics. Gramsci defined a dimension of consensus that guaranteed the reproduction of domination in favor of the powerful social and economic strata. Hegemony constitutes a whole body of practices and expectations in relation to the totality of life. It includes our senses and energies, the defined perceptions of the world and of ourselves. Hegemony is a vivid system of values and meanings that, as it is experienced as a group of practices, tends to be confirmed and reproduced (Williams, 1988). In the stronger sense, hegemony is a “culture”, Williams continues, but a culture that has to be considered as the vivid domination and subordination of particular classes.

Media play a major role in contemporary societies and that is why the conjunction between hegemony and fiction becomes relevant for the analysis. Even though “fiction” is a concept strongly related to literature with a vast history and connotation, the decision to use it was related to the results of previous inquiries. As stated before, the number of interviews made in ten years of research allowed me to identify naturalized representations and images of and about media. Those

naturalizations were not only crystallized in the images that the interviewed subjects had but in the collective mind through media. The power of media to impose meanings, representations, opinions and perspectives should not be underestimated. The idea of “fiction” is related to both the constructions and representations in a specific moment of time and space. Fiction is a way of naming the strategies and procedures that media use to present their representations avoiding to show the process through which they are constructed. Fiction is not something “false” or simply “not true”. Fiction is used here to name the combination of processes through which representations are not only constructed but also established as a way of perceiving the world, its conflicts and everything that happens on a daily basis.

The invisibilization of the processes that are involved in the messages and media programs is a key aspect to consider: the naturalization is a result of the ways in which power structures function. Power is everywhere and works as an interconnected network (Foucault, 1975). So hegemony and naturalization are combined processes: power struggles in order to reproduce the social structure. Media is, clearly, both part of the power structure and a tool used by powerful subjects and institutions. Media and hegemony are associates, they work together to establish meanings, representations and agendas that will organize social perception of time and space.

3. Hegemonic fictions: new audiences and new practices?

“Hegemonic fiction” is a concept that will allow us to articulate previous research with content and media analysis of contemporary media. The identification of the fictions is a way of organizing paths to build a reflection about audiences and new practices. Four entries compose this part of the paper. Each one will present a synthesis of the research made around specific matters of contemporary media and audiences.

3.1. The fiction of choice

More than three hundred networks of digital satellite television and the endless possibilities that the Internet gives its users to look for programs, series, movies, games (both legally and illegally), have changed the relationships that audiences can have with their favorite pieces of media. Audiences are part of a major system in which they choose, as consumers, what to watch, what not to watch, what to look for and what to follow. The possibility to maneuver or, in a current metaphor, “navigate”²,

² “To Navigate”: a naturalized and accurate metaphor (see Lakoff and Johnson, 1995). “To navigate” in a chaotic and disorganized ocean of information in which the meaningful knowledge is difficult to find without the needed skills (Simone, 2001 and Piscitelli, 2002). To navigate in

among these options arise a series of questions: which options do we have as audiences? How do we choose what we watch, read or search? Which competences or skills are necessary? Which characteristics does the repertoire from which we select have? And finally, who produces/pays/sells that repertoire?

Gruner (2002) sustains that, from a cultural point of view, there are three phenomena that must be considered: a) the massive displacement from verbal codes to a domination of the visual codes; b) the tension between dominant culture and the subordinates that has practically reduced to zero: we are in the domain of mercantile fetishization and the cultural industry; c) the conflictive relationship between “high” and “low” culture that tends to result in a “zero” sum.

The displacement of verbal codes to the visual ones is explained, in a first approach, because of the hegemony of television among the group of available media. Even the Internet, in its articulation of varied technologies, privileges without a doubt the visual aspect. Both newspapers and magazines have agreed to shorten journalistic articles in favor of photographs, graphics and several other possibilities of the visual field. For audiences, the explosion of visual possibilities is less demanding: to sit in front of a screen and pay attention (with different levels of interest) to what is being said, shown or explained can be part of a relaxing moment of the journey. Uses and gratifications as Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) have identified media uses by audiences. A subject can watch television or play a computer game with different levels of attention in order to gratify himself through that “use”. The recognition of audiences as active has led to the identification of the previous “overestimation” of the media power, as Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) have called it. The recognition of audiences as actively confronting media messages was deeply analyzed by Cultural Studies (see Hoggart, 1957; Morley, 1992, Hall, 1979; Silverstone, 1998; Stevenson, 1998, among many others). The relationship between media and audiences was claimed to be related with the social and cultural background of audiences and also with the physical and imaginary spaces in which media were consumed.

Mercantile fetishization and cultural industry are related with this but from the perspective of the Frankfurt school of thought. Adorno and Horkheimer (1969) claimed that the displacement from the mass culture to what they call cultural industry entails a position about both massification of certain productions and the access to cultural

the World Wide Web and in the new available devices can be, at the same time, a way of entering a democratic space but also the key to the available knowledge remains only for those trained to find what they were looking for. That is why “to navigate” involves a reflection upon the possibilities and limitations of the availability of the information. Who gets to access the significant knowledge on line? It is clear that the fact of having the proper device does not guarantee the same possibilities for all owners.

goods. The word culture includes virtually the position and the classification that delivers culture to the reign of administration (Adorno and Horkheimer, *op. cit.*). Stereotypes, redundancy, previsibility, messages structured in multiple layers and presuntuosity, are some of the operations that cultural industry organizes to reproduce itself as an articulated system (Adorno, [1954] 2002). In short, through different resources a certain control is operated over the subjects that is not perceived as a result of alienation processes (Adorno and Horkheimer, *op. cit.*). Williams, reading Marx, sustains that alienation implies the ignorance of the subordinated classes of their mere conditions of existence as a collateral effect of the division of labor, private property and the capitalist production structure. The worker loses at the same time the product of his work and the sense of his own creative activity as a consequence of the expropriation of both by the capital (Williams, 1976).

Entel *et. al.* (1999) recognize as a consequence of the ignorance of the conditions of existence, the subjects belief that they can act freely when actually their behavior is an adaptation to a legality and rationality that aim to submit and control them. "The appearance of free choice of the subject in front of the producers of cultural industry reveals its falseness as it promotes a freedom in which all the decisions have already been made by the market who is the one who really gets to choose" (Entel, *et. al.*, 1999: 119).

Therefore, the dominance of visual codes, the industrialization of culture and the effects of that industrialization in the subjects can be explained in the same context: the production of media messages and the control of that production are in the hands of the dominant classes who are in charge of the ideological load and the guarantee of the perpetuation of the economic structure. The tendency of erasing the differences between "high" and "low" culture is explained through the mercantile attempt to produce homogeneous goods which could be also predictable and redundant in order to interest the greater amount of subjects at the same time. It's the "faceless culture" that Hoggart defined (1957) whose beginning and end are organized around the capture of more and more *clients* (readers, spectators, buyers, users, ...) presenting them homogeneous, predictable and stereotyped products (Eco, 1965).

The possibility of audiences *choosing*, in the context of the cultural industry, its limits and horizons, is limited and that is why choice was identified as one of the hegemonic fictions. The repertoire from which audiences get to choose what to watch, read, play, use or navigate, is decided by producers and directors of major media companies. The great amount of television networks, the possibility of downloading and customizing the moments in which we can watch or read what we select to consume should not be confused with freedom. The hegemonic fiction of choice is related to the

construction of a greater sense of freedom in the exact same moment in which control is stricter and tighter. Foucault (*op. cit.*) described this process as the passage from discipline to control societies.

The key of this hegemonic fiction lies in the identification of a powerful and articulated system that dominates both leisure and work dimensions of the everyday lives of social subjects. One of the main tasks of this system is to present redundant, predictable and stereotyped products creating the idea that we get to chose between the ones we like the most. The possibility of choosing between identically formatted products produces the sensation of freedom in the exact same moment in which control gets tighter and tighter. Ratings, workshops and panels organized in order to measure the reactions of audiences with products, are a clear attempt to control every single detail of what happens in the market and in the interchange between consumers and products.

Choice, a fiction that contributed to the reproduction of hegemonic structures; the clear attempt to erase the determinations and codifications of media products in the very same moment in which more control and surveillance are needed. The hegemonic fiction of choice, the first of the four fictions that I will present here in order to compose a picture of the contemporary media system and its audiences.

3.2. The fiction of participation

Social bonds, groups of interest, colleagues, family, leaders of opinion³, preferences, the need to relax and disconnect, all these are variables that operate between the emission and reception of media messages. That means that each message enables multiple and varied readings (I will return to this in the fourth fiction). So, we get to the consideration not only of the individuals in front of the screens and other media, but to an approach that classifies individual and group needs (the uses oriented towards the gratifications) in order to *use* media conveniently. Media, in this approach, competes with other sources of gratification (Katz, Blumler y Gurevitch, 1974). This means that someone could chose not only between two different programs but between watching television and playing soccer, for example.

In this context, media looked for mechanisms through which individuals could be a significant part of the emissions in order to create ties and fidelity between shows and audiences. Letters and phone calls to radio stations were the first way through which audiences took part in media. The construction of a moment of feedback between producers and audiences helps the consolidation of the relationship between

³ As defined by Lazarsfeld, Berelson y Gaudet (*op. cit.*), Lazarsfeld y Merton (*op. cit.*), among many others.

them. Hence, with the development of technologies of communication, in the last decade of the XXth century and in the hegemony of the market neopopulism (Mattelart and Neveu, 1997), "Big Brother", appeared as a paradigm of participation but also as a major hegemonic fiction. This television show articulated Orwell's dystopia in *1984* (1949) and Foucault's considerations about control and imprisonment (the passage from the body-to-body control to a permanent and invisible control) (Foucault, 1975). The key of "Big Brother" is the reunion of a group of post-adolescents (they cannot be underage kids) to a "house" that is locked without any chances of getting out without authorization. The house is full of cameras that are installed in every single corner of the house so as to register everything that happens there. A "game" is established as the contestant who gets to stay the most, is the one who wins both popularity and a certain amount of money.

The interesting aspect of "Big Brother"⁴ for our analysis is not the transnationalization of the format nor the type of contestant who gets to be in the house (urban middle classes), nor the voyeurism that it encourages: the key of the programs is that the winner is "chosen" by audiences. Certain methods to "vote" are established (and they call it election or vote in an attempt to appeal to the legitimacy and democracy of the results) through which audiences can vote to decide who gets to leave the house or any option that might be enabled to be voted all along the show. The votes are not qualified but charged to the voter (sms, phone calls): audiences need to pay in order to vote.

Many programs have used the model that "Big Brother" proposed to include in its development the fragmented, heterogeneous and distant audience that follows the shows⁵. And here we find another key of analysis: the fragmentation of audiences in what marketing identifies as "targets" implied the displacement of the family as the imaginary social horizon of television (Bourdon, 2003 and Morley, 1992) in favor of the individualization of spectators. This individual spectator is invited by television, radio, web sites, to participate *actively* in the election of a winner of a reality show, to give his/her opinion about a matter, to answer questions they ask.

Finally, it is in this movement in which participation emerges as a meaningful instance to those who are in front of the television set following the alternatives of a program, answering an on-line survey or calling the radio to participate in any type of inquiry. The hegemonic fiction is based in the attempt to include the spectator and to

⁴ See Andacht (2003) who performed a semiotic analysis of the program in both Argentina and Brazil.

⁵ For example, "Dancing with the stars", "America's got talent", "American Idol", "Latin American Idol", to mention a few of the existent.

constitute him/her as a sovereign (in “Big Brother” they even use the metaphor “The spectator is the sovereign here”) in the choices and options available.

In the previous fiction it was clear that the offer was not decided by audiences. The participation methods proposed by media are not only standardized but closed (there is not much to do: either you answer/vote, or your message is discarded), the task of the audience is limited to follow the rules that media impose and to answer questions as an “A” student.

Regarding audience participation a fiction is built. This fiction consists in the affirmation of a certain interaction between audiences and shows, programs or on-line surveys that help media more than the subject who is participating. Media get the information they need, the votes that will legitimize something on the screens. Besides paying for the participation, audiences remain unchanged. Of course there might be a certain pleasure in talking to a host, or being part of a major vote as in “Big Brother”. The truth is that audiences get to participate *only* in the ways in which media needs them to do so; there is no ambiguity in the task: either you stick to the rules or your vote or message is not counted in. In cultural industry, nothing is left for the free will of individuals. The hegemonic fiction of participation is based on that: the construction of a feedback that only works for the benefit and needs of media.

3.3. The fiction of objectivity

The passage from verbal codes to the domination of visual codes, implied a change in the codification and circulation of messages. One of the most impressive transformations regarding media history (and that today is naturalized) is the appearance of live and direct images from different places⁶. The first television audience, surprised and suspicious of the reach of the new media, was familiar with the fusion of both images and sound through cinema. The complete novelty was the live transmission from the place where things were happening in order to witness the scene in the exact same moment. This technical possibility encouraged a belief according to which television was “objective” as it showed things exactly as they were. Ferrés claims that the authenticity of the television image is given by its “live” quality: the simultaneity is what gives television the power of reality that, in the same moment can show a different space (Ferrés, 1994). This hegemonic fiction is based on mechanisms through which that objectivity is created: the belief that showing something broadcasted live is a synonym of “truth”.

⁶ About the first years of Argentine television see Varela (2005).

One of the main procedures that media use is the selection. They select what they show or say, what appears first and what second, the ways in which a piece of news is presented, what is not shown or does not appear in their programs. The same functioning of media favors speed and the need of a permanent adjustment with what happens in the exact same time that the program is in the air. How is the information selected? Which are the elements that we need to consider when analyzing the selections?

Firstly, the ideological load of what is being transmitted. Bourdieu (2001) claims that ideologies are doubly determined: they owe their character not only to the interests of the class to which they belong but also to the specific interests of those who produce it and the specific logics of the field of production. In this sense, every message is ideological because, as Bajtin states, the forms of the signs that compose the messages are conditioned by the social organization of the participants and by the immediate condition of the interaction (Bajtin, 1979). In a program for kids, in a soap opera or in the news, there are certain topics and approaches that are privileged. This is clear in the time that media gives to topics or news.

Ferrés (*op. cit.*) sustains that the credibility of everything that is broadcasted “live” is reinforced by the image for “authenticity”. In other words, when watching a documentary in which something is narrated and what happens is clearly seen by audiences, objectivity appears as an evidence: media are showing something and as we watch it, we should believe it. The power of the image should not be underestimated. Naturally, this does not mean that nobody suspects of the ways through which scenes are represented, even in documentaries and live television. But it is also true that facing certain types of images, the sense of realism that television provides is pretty efficient to get the effect wanted⁷.

Secondly, the concept of representation is a key aspect of Social Sciences and media studies. Representation is the other side of the so called and pretended “objectivity” of media. To represent is the theoretical answer to the so called “reflection” that media say they provide of reality: media do not reflect anything in the same direction as a mirror gives us an image of ourselves in front of them. Media represent because they select, divide, organize the information and they hide all the needed processes from their audiences. The mere position of a camera in an event is saying a lot of things about the point of view that is being constructed. Politicians, citizens, actors and whoever gets to be included on media are selected previously considering

⁷ A simple exercise in front of any news network would be to follow the transmissions for two or three hours in order to identify the times in which a presenter mentions something like this: “we are showing things exactly as they are happening”, “This is what it is happening right now”, “the only thing we are doing is to place a camera” or “we give voice to the people in the scene”.

the effect wanted. In the same way, when interviewing someone “a common citizen” on the streets, the questions, the adjectives and the phrases used are not innocent nor casual; there is a certain type of information that is being searched and a certain effect that aims to be constructed. The elaboration of a personal point of view of the facts or the things represented are, as Eco says, a narration (Eco, *op cit.* 363).

In consequence, representation is the most important operation through which media produce its messages, which are not lineal nor “direct”; they are social constructions that, in the hands of producers and owners of media, are going to orient the presentation of topics, problems and events according to the interests they represent. Media propose always situations “that do not have any connections with the situations of the consumers, but they still continue to be, for them, model situations” (Eco, *op. cit.*: 48).

If every message is ideological, the complexity of the media messages is its eagerness to hide the conditions of production (in terms of Verón, 1987), as it is them who can explain, on one side, the fallacy of objectivity (Ferrés, *op. cit.*) and, on the other, the functionality of the mere possibility of the existence of something as a *reflection* of something else. Television is a window to the world, both of the public and the private and daily dimensions. As every window, it is not completely transparent nor clear (Orozco Gómez, 1996).

Foucault (1983) said that every translation, even the most literal one, implied some violence over what was being translated; every mechanism that intervenes is going to take part in the codification of the messages, disarming the false pretension of media about their objectivity. The defense of objectivity by media is to widen the audience from all targets and social strata, the specification of a positioning might take some spectators away. As media aim to capture as many spectators as possible, hiding conditionings and approaches is a great benefit when codifying a message. Wouldn't it be more honest and transparent –and yet radically utopian- that media could dismount the false pretension of objectivity and, in consequence, could visualize the mere conditions in which messages are produced? This hegemonic fiction is constituted in all the mentioned dimensions coping with the institutions and the consolidation of objectivity as a capital owned by television and that provides an advantage when comparing with other media (YouTube has partially changed this matter but there are problems of copyright and of credibility to be resolved as editing in YouTube has lead to major debates and demands). The new communicational ecosystem in which mobile phones, cameras, Facebook and the possibility of uploading videos in different pages are more and more frequent, might change the frame from which we analyze objectivity. In any case, the emission stage and the

codification of the message is more powerful and clear when it comes from an institution and credibility and authenticity is still debated when facing home-made videos.

3.4. The fiction on the reception stage

From the moment in which printing was possible, the circulation of pamphlets, texts and books transformed reading into an individual, private and silent activity (Chartier, 1999), displacing for good the collective reading as a social activity. This implied directly a greater freedom when looking for meanings and interpretations that were not forced to be made public. Reading had turned out to be a major solitary and silent moment. The relationship between readers and texts assumed multiple forms, dynamics and is articulated with both the individual and collective history.

As with books, the possibility to access technology in the households multiplied the number of radios, television sets, recorders, mobile phones and computers. In some households, there are as many television sets as inhabitants. This multiplication (strictly related to the massivity of both the devices and the prices) demands the construction of a different approach to the analysis of audiences. Media messages are received and, at the same time, articulated with the material and symbolic conditions of the subjects. Audiences constantly articulate social and historical processes each time they face media. There is no such thing as an “abstract” or a-historical audience⁸.

The displacement of the family as both the horizon and the unit of reception that television searched to the individualization of reception (related to the so called *targeting* of audiences), transforms reception into a negotiation stage (a process identified by Morley in 1995 and 1996) in which the spectator is alone and silent. But, the fact that a spectator is alone does not mean that the reception, production and interpretation of what is being said, read, presented or heard is individual. Even when we are alone, we receive and analyze messages from social interpretation frames. If media messages allow audiences multiple readings, these will be among the limits of those social *legitimate* frames (or at least in tension with them) in a certain historical time and space.

The consideration, on one side, of the omnipotence of media messages and the absolute relativization of their power, on the other, demands the construction of an intermediate point of view in the analysis: it is not that spectators are *powerless* in front of media power; but they are not *powerful* so as to do whatever they want with a

⁸ Both audiences and reception are used as a subjective and active process through which a message is received. Some references about this are Brundson (1990); García Galera (2000); Lindlof and Traudt (1983); Lull (1982); Mata (1988); Montero Rivero (2006); Grimson and Varela (1999 and 2005), to name only a few.

codified message broadcasted in certain conditions. We find, in the middle, the so called “mediations” (Serrano, 1977, Martín-Barbero, *passim* and Orozco Gómez, 1994 and 2002 among others). These are the intermediate stages that operate in the reception stage (and, at the same time, in the codification of the messages) and orient in diverse directions the readings that audiences can make. Reference groups, the *habitus*, the structured and structuring structures that operate in our social praxis (Bourdieu, 1988), the institutions with which we connect, the dynamics of the groups that we belong to, the situations of reception the degrees of attention; finally, the material and symbolic conditions in which we are socially located, are going to condition our readings not only of media messages but of any type of message or interaction to which we get close to.

For Martín-Barbero (1987), culture is the major mediation of the social processes and it is objectified in three concrete practices: sociability, rituality and technicity. These three processes take for granted the relationship between audiences and media and its techniques. The possible readings of a media message are articulated with the mediation that are closely related to social groups and frames.

In this sense, in his famous article, Hall (1979) presents three hypothesis that work as reception “positions” from which a media message can be received: the dominant (in which the codification and the decodification tend to be articulated), the negotiated (that implies the mixture between both adaptive and oppositional elements) and the oppositional (in which the message is de-totalized from the referential code and re-totalized in alternative reference frames). Morley (1992), some years later, criticized these hypothesis claiming that each one of these positions should be divided in multiple possible readings according to the mentioned mediations.

Another group of researches is formed by Latin American scholars who analyzed the reception stage in two major displacements (Sunkel, 1999): the first one was the passage from considering the message as an ideological structure to the identification of the reception as a critical stage. Fuenzalida (1984) sustains that critical reception is a strategy of resistance to the influence of television. For Orozco Gómez (1996) it is necessary to know in order to intervene, so he proposes media literacy as a path to de-totalize media messages in order to see, in them, the mechanisms that are both invisible and naturalized. Many scholars have proposed media literacy as a path to construct a critical approach to media and to the new audiences that are being formed in the light of new technologies and devices: Masterman (1993); Giroux (1996); Ferrés (1994); Mc Laren (1995); Barbero (2003); Fuenzalida, (2005); Morduchowicz (2001) among many others.

The importance of media literacy is based in the future: today's children are tomorrow's adults who are going to be related to media almost inevitably. The identification of stereotypes, representations, selections and invisibilizations that occupy a great part of media are a key aspect for a critical citizenship as audiences. Media tend to demand more and more from audiences: participation, identification and fidelity; audiences should demand and be able to criticize media messages from a complex perspective.

The second displacement is, for Sunkel, the one that goes from critical reception to cultural consumption, that is, the construction of a specialized spectator in the analysis of his/her consumptions. In the end of 1980s and the 1990s (in the context, as I mentioned, of neoconservatist politics) "audience ethnographies" find their way in the field⁹. Audience ethnography is a qualitative methodology that, as such, aims to know in depth the informants in their everyday lives. To study audiences entailed, for scholars, the displacements to the households of the informants (the displacement towards the "politics of the living room", Silverstone and Morley, 1991) to analyze the media consumption, dynamics and the relationships that the members of the families could establish. The centrality of the differential appropriations of media messages lead to the consideration of the reception stage as a moment of production.

Audiences produce meanings, bonds and preferences when they engage with media. So, why this hegemonic fiction about the reception stage? There is an unresolved tension in media research between the openness of messages and their closure. It is important to keep in mind the necessary and inevitable production that any subject produces with messages not only from media but in different areas of his/her life. It is in the acknowledgement of the varied stages of subjective production where we will find the individual mark, that is, in the end, a social mark of cultural, social and political experience. It is, finally, in the reading and production that appears in the reception stage where we might have the possibility of constructing the heterogeneous in the homogeneous; the chance to identify the interesting from the irrelevant information. The questions that we must ask are, then, the ones that encourage complex interpretations: what do subjects do with media? What do media do with subjects? In other words, what do media do with all the information they obtain from their audiences (preferences, likes, dislikes, etc)? The production of the subjects in their relationship with media is used by media groups as ways to check, try and

⁹ Ang (1991); Bourdon (2003); Liebes and Katz (1991); Morley and Silverstone (1990), are a reference to this matter.

evaluate the offer they present to society. Audiences are being used and demanded more and more through multiple devices, votes, evaluations and opinions.

There is no way to analyze audiences and reception beyond the acknowledgements of their material and symbolic conditions of living. That is why the notion of hegemonic fiction becomes relevant and useful for the analysis. The problem lies not only in what subjects do with the objects but which objects are available for subjects. These objects establish the horizon of experiences that are the combination of the encounter of a culture with the objects of other cultures, of old and new knowledges (Sarlo, 2001). The key in this fiction is to understand the complexity of the relationship between audiences and messages: neither of them should be underestimated.

4. Conclusions: new audiences?

The hypothesis that organized this paper claimed that media demanded different actions and behaviors from audiences. The construction of new audiences is strictly related to social, technological and economic changes. The possibility of having a mobile phone which is connected to the internet but that can also work as a television set is a major change regarding emission. Audiences have also changed. The four hegemonic fictions that structure this paper pretended to present an approach to the major strategies that media use and that tend to be considered as “natural” by a great part of the audience.

The hegemonic fiction of choice, of participation, of objectivity and the hegemonic fiction on the reception stage were a gate of entry to analyze contemporary media and audiences as a both dynamic and dialectical couple. It is impossible to conceive media without audiences and the ways in which audiences are constructed by and through media are a major concern for media analysts. Every hegemonic fiction implies a series of strategies of codification and decodification and it is in the encounter between media messages and audiences in which social meaning is built and reproduced.

That is why, when facing media we are never alone, we are always in relationship with and in tension to other social discourses and behaviors that surround us. Media literacy is, clearly, one of the paths to overcome media constructions and strategies. And it is basically a tool to educate new audiences: young and “old” audiences, kids and grown-ups need to count with a tool that would help them dismount and disarm media messages so as to identify stereotypes, redundancies, models, representations. Media will never cease to represent events and society in the most convenient ways for them; their goal is to widen audiences and, in consequence,

profit. We, as audiences, need to build a critical approach to media messages, a critical point of view that will allow us the transformation of both the effects and the consequences in our everyday life. It is not by turning off every single device how we will learn how to be critical; we need to live *with* media, learning and educating societies how to identify and dismantle the hegemonic fictions that appear to be completely naturalized in and by media. That is, of course, a political action. Politics is a major tool of social transformation, isn't it?

5. References

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