

COMMENT

Ideology and the Media: A Response

Martin Barker's examination of problems and evasions discernible in the use made of the concept of ideology by major strands of media research (*Radical Philosophy* 46) is timely. Media analysis in Britain seems now to be well-launched into a phase in which empirically-based studies, including studies of audience behaviour and understanding as well as of production settings, have replaced the tendency to attempt the perfection of some general theory of the media 'apparatus'. Where this leaves many of the earlier formulations about media *power*—about ideological reproduction, reality-defining and the capacity of the media to inscribe 'preferred readings' into their texts—is not immediately clear. As the more recent research brings in a wider range of data and of variables concerning media processes, questions of a more general kind about the role which the media might play in the sustaining of cultural and political hegemony are having to be re-addressed.

Barker's lucid and openly-worked discussion contrasts strongly with the litany of under-argued theoreticisms which have all too frequently provided the currency for writing on the topic. I would like to respond here by commenting on aspects of Barker's main point that there is a damagingly *non-cognitive* and often *non-social* character to the conceptualisations of ideology and ideological influence employed. I would also like to bring into this consideration, more than he finds space to do, the matter of *representational form*, in particular distinctive forms of realism/naturalism developed within television.

Too often, Barker argues, ideology is regarded as something which is 'implanted' in the audience or readership through a bypassing of cognitive understanding which allows textual devices to work upon emotions and feelings. He notes that media research is often extremely unclear about quite how this process is achieved, observing that the whole matter of 'mechanisms' in the study of ideology and the media has received far less attention than, say, that of the various formal features which can characterise ideological discourse. Such an *affective* emphasis is, Barker suggests, inadequate as an approach to studying how popular opinion and prejudice are formed and sustained and he uses the example of racism to illustrate his point.

I think he is right in identifying this assumption that ideology works 'deeper than belief' as a weakness in many studies of the media. If racist ideology is seen to be reproduced through the emotive devices of a 'moral panic' and appeals to fear, then questions about what *sense* people make of media depictions, the reasons which they give for their views on 'race' and then about the particular (including sociological) conditions of such reasoning might seem beside the point.

For a radical critic, one strategic advantage in taking up such a position is that, within its terms, the majority of the people, whilst not necessarily seeming to be dupes, do not appear to be much implicated in the *production* of the non-radical 'beliefs' to which they apparently lend support and they can therefore be presumed more accessible to projects of radical realignment. However this may be, though, it seems to me that

one of the main factors behind the non-cognitive emphasis follows from a concern with *the particular semiotic and epistemic character of the visual media*.

There is by now an extensive literature on the 'naturalising' power of film and television production techniques. In engaging with film and television which so often stress their 'transparency' and 'immediacy', it is perhaps not surprising that researchers became preoccupied with *devices* of realism and with ideas concerning the propagation of a 'naturalised' public knowledge grounded in the technology of illusion. This has led to far too many *assumptions* being made about the success of programmes in, first of all, actually *seeming* transparent and obvious to real audiences and then, under this 'cover', in actually generating 'preferred readings' consonant with dominant ideology.

Barker appropriately cites David Morley's book *The Nationwide Audience* as an attempt to get beyond speculation of this kind by means of a sociological survey of decoding practice. He finds, nevertheless, that commendable as it may be in general design and aims, here too the problems arise of an essentially non-cognitive (mystificatory) ideological process being worked upon an audience which, insofar as it is 'taken in' by, or affectively succumbs to, the 'preferred reading', is really being viewed as *desocialised* in its receptive/interpretative behaviour. I have some reservations about what Barker has to say here and these, together with the question of the 'transparency effect' mentioned above, bear on the important issue of how it might be possible to undertake duly 'cognitive' audience studies whilst retaining the framework of an ideology/power analysis.

There is considerable conceptual confusion surrounding the notion of 'preferred reading', as any attempt to answer the question 'preferred by *whom*, *how* and at what *point* in the meaning process' might quickly attest. Moreover, the widespread use of Frank Parkin's meaning-system typology (dominant, negotiated and oppositional) as a way of categorising audience responses has led both to unhelpful conflation and divisions.¹ Nevertheless, Morley seems to me to regard his 'dominant code' readers as interpreting from inside fully *social* frameworks of meaning. These frameworks provide them with the sets of relations and categories, the connotational fields etc., by which to construe from the programme elements a package of meanings consistent with dominant ideology. Such interpretative resources are already socially installed by a variety of discursive routes not excluding the accumulation of previous 'media knowledge'. The signifiers of the programme elements interact with them, most likely extending and re-organising around some new topic or event such as finally to prompt and inform a closure of understanding within dominant terms. (Can we legitimately refer to this as an 'ideological effect'? I think so.)

So the *socioality* of the process does not seem by itself to be a problem, though I would agree with Barker that a lot of other questions might be begged in the description. Does this

mean, as he suggests, that influence is only ever *putative* in this line of research, that in practice all that are *found* are 'negotiated readings'?

My own understanding of current audience studies and my own work, with a colleague, into interpretations of documentary television indicates not.² First of all, the sheer *range* of 'fit' between programme elements and viewers' interpretations and the extent to which viewers regard these elements as suspect, motivated (in whatever direction) or not and then as of various weight and alignability in relation to existing knowledge and ideas make 'negotiated reading' a pretty banal *category* for the researcher to use (part of Barker's point too, I think).

But viewers' accounts also document the unproblematic use of filmed material as evidence; the ways in which particular phrasings or depicted 'telling instances' appear to move viewers through to certain positions and to seal understanding and, more broadly, the shifts and turns in interpretation occasioned by often unrecognised aspects of production method, structure and style. I believe it follows from this that attempts to use media education as, in part, a way of developing critical resistance need not be so outlandishly misconceived as Barker seems to think.

'Influence' has a treacherously psychologistic ring to it and 'reproduction' may smack of too neat and totalising a process, but the variable ideological bearing of media representations upon viewer understandings remains the most important dimension for audience research to investigate. This is in con-

trast to that celebration of interpretative relativism and readerly independence which some studies have displayed, seemingly still caught up in the exhilaration of rejecting structuralist rigidities to the extent that questions of power and domination have almost entirely slid off their agenda. Certainly, the close attention to matters of belief and reasoning as well of the feelings which Barker calls for would be necessary in furthering such an investigation, alongside attention to media rhetorics and the relationships of social location. As for the use to which he sees Voloshinov's dialogical theories being put, I look forward to seeing that case developed more fully in a further paper.

John Corner

- 1 A useful account of conceptual problems in this area is contained in Justin Lewis, 'The Encoding/Decoding Model', *Media, Culture and Society* 5(2), 1983, pp. 179-197.
- 2 Publications so far are Kay Richardson and John Corner, 'Reading Reception', in *Media, Culture and Society* 8(3), 1986, pp. 485-508, and John Corner and Kay Richardson, 'Documentary Meanings and the Discourse of Interpretation' in John Corner (ed.), *Documentary and the Mass Media*, Arnold, 1986, pp. 140-160. For a provocatively 'cognitive' study see also Justin Lewis, 'Decoding TV News' in P. Drummond and R. Paterson (eds.), *Television in Transition*, British Film Institute, 1984.

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