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Semiotics, Structuralism, and Television Language?

Personally, I realize that I am just a simple college student, whose interests lie mostly in the technical and production end of communication and media, yet I still feel it is very important that I voice my opinion on this subject of semiotics and structuralism. With my media studies background lacking many theory courses, I first and foremost admit that my opinion will be mostly one sided, as that of a theory ignorant, production-based Neanderthal. Yet I offer my analysis of semiotic and structuralism as they refer to television, as well as, my belief in television possessing its own language, similar to film.

Throughout the readings we learned that semiotics is the study of everything that can be used in communication, and it studies the ways that signs communicate and the rules that govern their use. Although my major is radio, television, and film, my interest lies in the major of television, more television, and maybe a little bit of film. Although these two are looked upon as low forms of art and entertainment, as a member of the masses, I thank the ruling class for giving them to us, and thus I cherish them everyday.

I found the readings regarding semiotics and television to be very interesting, and I was most fascinated by the explanation of the schedule of television. In television, we have series and serials, in which series are shows whose characters and settings are recycled but the story concludes in each individual episode, and serials are shows that progress from week to week. After reading this, I definitely can see a difference between the two types of scheduling and why there is a need for both. Serials seem to be more for the die-hard lover of storylines and

seemingly never-ending plots. Today, probably the most obvious serial is the “Soap Opera”, which graces daytime television in America. With programming like the Soap Opera, life and time in the show goes on with or without the viewer, and almost never backtracks. In the Soap Opera, there is also virtually no such animal as the rerun or life after first-run, also known as syndication. Soap Operas seem to be targeted mostly toward women. My sexist opinion tells me that this is because of the emotion and drama involved with the serial, but my media intuition tells me that this is whom the producers of the show are targeting. Just look at the amount of female products advertised during Soap Operas, and you will see exactly who advertisers believe watch these programs.

Series seem to be more for the casual viewer or full-time career individual, who may have to miss a week or few weeks at a time. Although series do progress somewhat, especially in recent television programming, in terms of storylines and character development, they constantly backtrack and explain what has happened in the past, over and over again. Series also have the benefit of life after death, which is known to the world as syndication. Sometimes this post death experience is several times longer than the original life of the series. One thing in the readings that I definitely did not agree with was the idea that series have diluted suspense and virtually no memory or history. Well here, I beg to differ, and offer one word, “Sweeps”, and one series, *Friends*. I don’t believe that there is a soap opera or another serial that can even contend with the suspense of waiting an entire summer to find out what the hell happened to a certain character or storyline. Also, the history is definitely evident in a show like *Friends*. If you are unaware of the back-story between characters, not only will you be lost in the intertwined storylines, but the jokes will absolutely make no sense at all.

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The reading also discussed Structuralism and Television. Structuralism stresses that each individual element within a cultural system obtains its meaning from its relationship to every other element in that system. It also stresses that there are no independent meanings in the system, but rather several meanings that are produced by their differences from other elements in that system. Television can be analyzed using a structuralist approach because of the way it operates as a view or assessment of culture, although most times in a stereotypic manner. This is due to structuralism being based on a model, which says that at birth individuals are subjected to the subcultures of culture and society. I would further extend this definition and say that not only are they subjected to the subcultures, but in most cases pick up the signs, beliefs, and interpretations of their subcultures, and ultimately become a product of that subculture.

For example, when I was young, my family lived in a low-middle class, predominately minority, neighborhood, where I only came in contact with Blacks and Hispanics. Thus, I had to rely on television and the subculture of black Baptist Christian individuals to tell me what the rest of society, such as whites, Asians, homosexuals, various other religions, and International cultures were like. The perceptions and stories that these subcultures and the great television storyteller presented were the only things in which I had to base my beliefs, and since there were no other representatives in my community to dispute these perceptions and stereotypes, I had to accept them as truth.

When we moved away, and my parents enrolled me in predominately white schools, the perceptions and stereotypes the subcultures and great television storyteller presented were finally challenged, and most times negated. I learned all whites were not racists, all Asians were not smart, all homosexuals were not flamboyantly gay, and all International cultures were not out to destroy America. As long as I was within a specific subculture everything seem structured

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perfectly, and everything seemed to be related to everything else. Elements in my life, such as relationships, beliefs, and personal items, all seemed to build off one another, and fall off one another in a domino-like effect. Although it may sound silly to me now, when I was young, every belief and meaning exist only as a product or result of something else.

While reading about film language, I couldn't help but relate the language of film to television. Pasolini argues that cinema formed a "language of reality", that explored and displayed "the production of social reality". Bruno believed in "The written language of reality", that reality is a "discourse of things", which film translates into a discourse of images. While there may be validity to both of these beliefs, if you have watched any recent television programming, this is exactly what is being displayed. Although I certainly understand that anytime a camera is introduced into any type of situation true reality disappears, in my opinion television still does the best job of presenting reality through its text and language, even if some people consider that reality to be imperfect.

First off, television looks real, in that it does have the grainy appearance of film. Television is also regarded as the principal storyteller in contemporary American society. Most times the discourse of television programming is evident by its intense narratives and conversation, as that is how most stories are told. Television has the perfect narrative, as it not only has a tale to convey, but also has a teller and a perfect listener, as the viewer has no way of interrupting or engaging the teller other than listening to him. It even has the genre of reality-truth, present in many of its reality television shows. Although often criticized as skewed, its social reality is evident by the news programs and sporting events, which even when edited, actually took place and represent the societies around us. Combine all this with Televisions

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codes of reality, representation, and ideology, and you have a television language that speaks to the masses.

Also, according to Metz, the cinema is not a language that is widely available as code, similar to the English language, but rather a language that must be invented and to which an individual must be talented, trained, and have access to. Well, television is a visual medium like film, which has many different genres of programming, across different networks, targeting different viewers, of which everyone does not have access to, such as is the case with premium cable television and pay-per-view.

In conclusion, as stated before, I could be considered a theory ignorant, production-based Neanderthal, but as such a character, there is some part of me that cannot help but wonder if the presence of semiotics in film and television exists simply because of coincidence or because of the perspective taken by the individuals who acknowledge its existence and explain them it to us. I truly believe in the presence of signs in life and television, and that they display meanings and enable us to interpret those meanings. But I also feel that sometimes a sign is not a sign, just a misunderstanding, and television is a sophisticated language, not easily interpreted or understood by those not versed in the production of social reality.