

TOWARD A SYNCHRONICAL STUDY OF THE UNCONSCIOUS STRUCTURES OF MASS MEDIA

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This present synthetical formulation is an attempt to emphasize the need for another mode of inquiry in mass communication (form and content) on the basis of the structuralist paradigm which proposes a rigorous approach toward understanding the underlying unconscious structures of mass media. This formulation also extends to a number of other perspectives and makes some hints on cross-cultural comparisons as this relates to the position of media and in particular television in contemporary culture, transitional or modern.

The most revealing aspect of the structuralist perspective ⁽¹⁾ is the attempt to apply the unconscious to the study of cultural phenomena ⁽²⁾. The theme of the unconscious, as developed by Freud, changed the episteme of psychological inquiry and made it possible to underlie the mental processes of which the individual is not immediately aware such as drives and desires, and what Whyte refers to as "organic or personal tendencies of needs, memories, motives, intentions, policies, beliefs, assumptions, thoughts, and dishonesties" ⁽³⁾.

(1) Azzi Abderrahmane, "Structuralism and Its Contribution to Sociological Theory," Unpublished Dissertation, NTSU, USA, 1985.

(2) Mass media is viewed as part of cultural phenomena.

(3) Stivers, Richard *Evil in Modern Myth and Ritual*, the University of Georgia Press, Athens, Georgia, USA, 1982, p. 7.

The work of different structuralists⁽¹⁾ is based in part on an attempt to uncover the unconscious structures of cultural phenomena. Thus, Levi-Strauss examines the synchronical interdependence of various elements of myth and suggests that the myth of the so-called primitive society is guided by unconscious structures: among others the attempt to overcome the contradiction between nature and culture. Lacan attempts to ground the unconscious in a sociological type of inquiry and argues that the unconscious is not merely the seat of instincts, but also of elements pertaining to the symbolic order of a given society. The unconscious also characterizes the study of art and literature. Here, Barthes maintains that the different forms of cultural expressions such as comic, strips, press, novel, and poetry must be analyzed as systems of signs whose signification remains to be discovered in accordance with the way in which a given society is organized, the distribution of power, and the historical period in which such expressions emerge. The study of historical texts reveals that texts reflect a particular episteme which manifests itself despite the author of the text (Foucault) and that such texts contain their own problematic of which the author is not aware (Althusser)⁽²⁾.

The theme of the unconscious, as a mode of analysis, distinguishes structuralism from other perspectives for no other theoretical approach makes the unconscious a central concern in the inquiry for a structural understanding of cultural phenomena. Functionalism and even phenomenology do not provide an

(1) The Structuralist perspective is a relatively recent phenomenon in the development of sociological theory. The more proximate roots of the perspective can be traced to Saussure, a linguist whose *Course in General Linguistics* made him the most credited precursors of structuralism. The principles of linguistics were first applied in the study of cultural phenomena when Levi-Strauss sought to study kinship, totemism, and myth as systems of language guided by linguistic properties such as the principle of binary opposition, etc. The central themes of structuralism, however, have more recently been reconstructed in the writings of post-structuralists, namely Lacan, Barthes, Althusser, and Foucault whose domain of inquiry incorporates psychoanalysis literature, ideology, and history. Structuralism provides a new dimension for the study of cultural phenomena. The perspective in particular proposes a cultural interpretation of the domains of mythology, criminology, madness and mental illness, art, literature, theatrical play, mass media, speech in clinical setting, historical transformation, and the dialectical process of change. This interpretation incorporates principles of linguistics such as the theory of sign and the synchronical analysis of phenomena, psychoanalytic theory, particularly the theme of the unconscious, and the conception of power of the critical school as it relates to social and economic conditions of a society, etc.

(5) Azzi, pp. 42-167.

explanation for the unconscious. Symbolic interactionism views the unconscious aspects of interaction only tangentially as the absence of reflecting, while the closest concept, in critical school, which may relate to the unconscious is false consciousness or alienation which results from manipulation of power⁽¹⁾.

The principles of linguistics which characterize structural analysis, nonetheless, do not exclusively pertain to the era of Saussure (the beginning of this century) for a cross-cultural comparison can take us to the works of some major Moslem thinkers (already at the 12th century) who set significant basis for what is called today the science of language. Al Anbari made the origin of grammar the central focus of the study of language. Takchbari (always at the 12th century) delineated the areas of linguistic in the study of words (Mofradat) and the study of syntaxes (Tarakib). He went further to subdivide the science of language into five domains: phonology (Makhrij Al Horouf), linguistics, code (Al Wadaâ), derivation (Ichtiqaq), and morphology (Tasrif). He then saw another subdivision of morphology into ethymology (Ossol Al Alfad) and radication (Al Tarsis)⁽²⁾, etc.

The study of the unconscious in current sociological research as well as in the study of mass media remains outside the domain of inquiry and is not made thematic. Stivers refers to sociologists in that regard and suggests that they "tended to shy away from the unconscious largely because it could not be directly observed and because they did not know how to study it sociologically"⁽³⁾. The same critical argument can be advanced in regard to mass media research in the United States and in many parts of the world which followed Lasswell's model of mass communication research. This pathological stance can be seen in two fields of communication studies; content analysis and audience research.

Studies of mass communication content particularly the content of print media systematically followed Lasswell's well publicized definition of content analysis: the organized and systematic study of the *manifest* content of mass communication⁽⁴⁾.

(1) Ibid, pp. 192-215.

(2) In Arabic, Sobhi Alsalah, "The Origins of Linguistics among Arab grammarians," *Al Fikr Al Arabi*, n° 8/9, Beirut, Lebanon, 1979, pp. 62-64.

(3) Stivers p. 7.

(4) Budd, Richard W. Thorp, Robert K., and Lewis Donohew, *Content Analysis of communication*, the Macmillan Company, New York, 1967.

This statistical quantitative approach, however, cannot go beyond the process of classifying the overt content into some categories apparent within the text regardless of what accounts for the basic structures of the text and the inference of such texts to other systems of signification within a society and in a particular historical context. This in part explains the relative poverty of a number of empirical studies on media content even in some distant societies as that of the grand Maghreb ⁽¹⁾.

The same argument can be advanced in relation to audience research. This type of research, once not well articulated, can take at face value other people's elaboration about the issues in questions. Stivers argues that "because most people's attitudes are ideological reflections of existing social arrangements, whether sociology studies the objective or subjective side of social life, it reinforces social "reality" ⁽²⁾.

The relative absence of structural analysis of the unconscious in contemporary mass media research can be attributed in part to the limitations inherent in current positivistic methodologies which do not permit access to the underlying structures which account for the form and content of modern products of communication. This is also due pragmatically to the fact that structural principles and techniques of inquiry were not, at least until recent past, well delineated and made available for a significant number of researchers particularly in the area of sociology of mass communication. The different researchers in mass media probably are mostly equipped for a quantitative type of analysis and are conditioned, both in their training and in what is expected from them in a technical post-industrial society, to develop a more statistical approach which can be labeled scientific per excellence.

This, however would now be difficult to justify. The study of the unconscious is based on inference that is no less scientific than the study that limits itself to the conscious expression of phenomena. The process of inference is not arbitrary, but it is guided by certain principles at the level of the individual such as

(1) More than 60% percent of mass communication studies at the institute of communication of the University of Algiers between 1976 and 1986 are content analysis following Lasswell's model of research.

(2) Stivers, p. 14.

the presence of split, failure, displacement, impediment, transference, etc. and at the cultural and sociological levels such as contradiction, symbolic order, signified, episteme, and problematic ⁽¹⁾.

The unconscious, as a concept, has oriented psychological enterprise ever since the theme was introduced by Freud and we do not intend here to expand on the term as such. Whyte proposes the use of the unconscious as an adjective not as a noun for "there are only mental processes (about which we know painfully little) which range from unconscious to conscious" ⁽²⁾. The term of collective unconscious is relatively recent and pertains to an effort which gives the unconscious various sociological and historical dimensions. The collective unconscious, not to be compared with Durkheim's collective consciousness, may account for sociological and historical transformations which largely escape our attempt to understand human society in general. For one thing, the collective unconscious, without evoking Durkheim's collective sui-generis or whether society is greater than the individual or not, can be viewed as the sum of the individual's unconscious processes which make up society. Stivers, however, suggests that the collective unconscious is not merely "the sum of the individual's unconscious mental processes within a group, but also in the sense that what does not surface to consciousness in the group is unlikely to enter the awareness of the individual" ⁽³⁾.

The structuralist perspective maintains Piaget's triangular basis of structure: the structure as a totality, the structure as a system of dynamic transformation, and the structure as self regulated. What relates to this present attempt is the aspect of structure as self regulated. The notion of self regulation is interpreted to mean that the dynamism of "structure" should not be identified with what is directly observable, for what is observable is a manifestation of a deep structure. The structure remains unconscious while it makes comprehensible the observable ⁽⁴⁾. The

(1) In Azzi.

(2) Stivers, p. 7.

(3) Ibid, p. 8.

(4) In Azzi.

cultural phenomenon, in relation to the unconscious, is composed of a signifier (that which is apparent and explicit) and a signified (that which remains beneath the surface and implicit). The analysis of the signifier permits one to discover the covert meanings underlying the overt content of cultural phenomena. This analysis is not, however, an easy task to undertake.

The unconscious structures are accessible through linguistically mediated form. In fact, language is a chain of signifiers, and even communication takes place at level of signifier, a level that reflects that diversity and complexity of meaning structures inherent in human speech. The structuralists in that context argue that the unconscious is structured like language and linguistic form is to be used as a bridge toward the unconscious. That is, the conscious expressions or explanations are merely secondary elaborations and the role of the critical researcher in mass media is to uncover the meaning underlying the manifest content of cultural phenomena, for these phenomena do not only express reality, but signify it as well (Barthes) ⁽¹⁾.

The unconscious in the structuralist approach is not merely the seat of instincts as maintains ego-psychology. The unconscious underlies, among other things, man's desires that pertain to relation validated by the community and the symbolic order in general (Lacan). This is consistent with Becker's view that the traditional view of the Oedipus complex leads to the death of meanings in human relation, and that such relations are guided by factors other than instincts such as the desire for prestige and what Becker calls "the desire to be noticed," both of which come from others ⁽²⁾.

The unconscious also relates to history. The apparent continuity in the development of knowledge overlooks shifts or discontinuities that do not manifest themselves at the conscious level. These shifts can be articulated through the analysis of texts that suggest new propositions, isolate new facts, build up new concepts, and advocate new modes of inquiry (Foucault) ⁽³⁾.

(1) Ibid.

(2) Becker, Ernest, *The Birth and Death of Meanings*, The Free Press, New York, 1971, pp. 87-111.

(3) In Azzi.

The structuralist analysis is based more on the synchronical than on the diachronical aspect of cultural phenomena. The themes of synchrony and diachrony were introduced by Saussure who argued that language is not a text subject to comparative analysis through time (diachronically) but a self-contained whole and must be studied in itself (synchronically) ⁽¹⁾. The structuralist view does not disregard history, but demystifies the concept of time. History records transformations over time (not structurally) and organizes its facts in relation to conscious expressions (not in relation to unconscious conditions of cultural phenomena). Thus, the ideological sphere can be best analyzed in terms of its relation to economic, political, and scientific sphere of a system and not in some isolated development aspects of such sphere ⁽²⁾.

The study of the unconscious acquires new signification in modern culture, for as Barthes puts it, the complexity of modern culture tends to hide the real link between the conscious expressions of cultural phenomena and the social conditions of life. The system of mythology and literature, particularly modern system, can also be used as means of social control (Barthes). As Stivers suggests, "With modern instrumental rationality embedded in technology exist mythology and a system of rituals, which to a larger extent escape our conscious awareness" ⁽³⁾. This mythology often addresses itself to the unconscious and irrational instincts as a means of social control. Hence the study of the unconscious is indispensable for understanding cultural phenomena, traditional or modern.

Modern culture sought to suppress the relation between the signifier and the signified. The elements of linguistic form can exist without being related to any value system. This reduces cultural phenomena into what Becker calls nothingness. The aspect of nothingness in modern culture is not accidental, for such tendency serves to prevent individuals from critical evaluation and participation in the production of their own culture. Here, I would argue that the same pattern with varying degrees

(1) Saussure, Ferdinand De, *Course in General Linguistics*, edited by Bally, Charles and translated by Baskin Wade, New York, the philosophical library, 1959.

(2) In Azzi.

(3) Stivers, p. 8.

can manifest itself in a transitional culture⁽¹⁾ (such is the case of many so-called developing countries) where systems of significations (cultural and historical) have witnessed discontinuities either as a result of many centuries of historical decadence (Inhitat) or as a consequence of modern era of colonization. Thus, the existing cultural structures do not usually pertain to a meaningful system of reference or to a defined stock of knowledge, but rather they incorporate relatively newly-introduced ideological references (political and others) as well as a combination of traditional, cultural, scientific, and mythical systems whose underlying structures remain to be analyzed. There are some exceptions to this rule. The religious sphere in the context of Moslem societies, for example, was able in spite of a number of historical breaks to maintain the aspect of continuity and inspire society as a mean of social change challenging both the colonial establishment and later the underlying unconscious political structures.

The differences among cultures with regard to the nature of cultural phenomena, the cultural products of social control, as well as their appeal to the unconscious needs, desires, etc. remain to be seen even though I would argue that similarities outweigh differences for the underlying structures of cultural phenomena in their empirical settings are the product of the same instrument: the human mind in spite of the fact that these settings can be a consequence of another system of beliefs such as religion. Cross-cultural comparisons can take place at different levels among of which McLuhan's model of oral and print media. The oral culture, such as the case of transitional society, is based on face to face communication where interactions and reactions take place without a distant-type of reflective awareness. This brings about "less an intellectual than an emotional relationship... This relationship is both sympathetic and uncritical"⁽²⁾. Literary, or print culture, allows for such reflective process and establishes distance between "the knower and the object of his knowledge"⁽³⁾. Thus,

(1) This is to distinguish it from primitive culture of which we tread merely in terms of historical inferences.

(2) Stivers, p. 9.

(3) Ibid.

a text once has been written one can think about it, add to it, suppress part of it, read it with another text in mind. Stivers, however, maintains, following McLuhan and Carpenter, that modern culture "is primarily oral and visual and only secondary literate". He adds, "while it is true that the mass media are dependent upon scripts, their impact upon listeners is essentially the same as that of the spoken word in oral cultures: unconscious"⁽¹⁾.

Thus, mass media in modern culture (particularly television) appeal to the emotional and the unconscious desires and instincts. Stivers suggests "we do not reflect on programs, we experience them. We relate to the images and sounds of the media in much the same manner primitive man relates to the images and sounds of his rituals"⁽²⁾. Techniques of advertising in such society address itself to the unconscious (individual and collective) which escapes the awareness of the individual as such and makes such individual acts to the advertiser's expectations. Stivers explains this tendency in modern society by referring to the aspect of instrumental rationality and technology. He suggests that "side by side with modern instrumental rationality embedded in technology exist mythology and a system of rituals, which to a large extent escape our conscious awareness," and that "technology blocks our conscious understanding of its actual workings"⁽³⁾. This interpretation is very relevant to modern culture, but I suggest there are other factors beside instrumental rationality and technology which account for the unconscious structures of mass media in modern culture.

The products of mass media (particularly oral and visual) in transitional societies are mostly imported. Hence, the appeal of such products are transferred with the same intentions, but to a different cultural context with probably most *devastating* consequences at the level of individual as well as at the level of society at large. While cultural and structural mechanisms of social control are not centralized and sophisticated as in the case of a

(1) Ibid p. 11.

(2) Ibid, p. 12.

(3) Ibid, p. 9.

technological society, it remains that the individual (and thus society) is not equipped culturally and educationally to confront these systems of significations whose structure remains underneath the conscious expression of cultural phenomena portrayed by the media. I have tried in another context ⁽¹⁾ to suggest that media in transitional society does not create public opinion or alienation, but a type for social imagination (Miqyal) in which one has to overcome conflicting interactions that exist among the traditional, mythical, the modern, the scientific, and the religious sphere of social reality in such a historical context.

(1) In Arabic, Azzi Abderrahmane, "public opinion, Al Shura, and Al Aqabia : A critical view, *Revue Algérienne de Communication* ; n° 5, 1991.