A Response to Stuart Hall: Towards a Creative Decoding

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Abstract

The three positions of decodings proposed by communication theorist Stuart Hall have become a starting point for contemporary cultural studies. He insists that receivers of cultural products are not necessarily passive but can be ‘oppositional’. Media scholar John Fiske has further advanced the theory, suggesting that receivers can turn to be ‘producerly’ in their reception of cultural products. The present paper sheds light on the possibility of a more active, even creative position on the part of receivers, particularly in relation to popular songs and other interactive texts. Receivers of cultural products are powerful others to the ‘producing elite’. Jürgen Habermas’s idea of ‘com-subjectivity’ provides a theoretical foundation for the validity and desirability of such ‘creative decoding’.

Keywords

creative decoding – interactive – com-subjectivity

1 Three Types of Decoding and Their Impact

Stuart Hall, the late British scholar of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, first proposed his theory of the three types of decoding in contemporary cultural semiotics in 1980 in his article ‘Encoding/Decoding’. Most scholars working in the field are familiar with this theory. Hall believes that generating the meaning of the symbolic text depends on the audience’s three different decoding ‘positions’ (2005: 117–127).
With the first decoding position, the ‘dominant-hegemonic code’, the audience accepts the intended meaning of the production elite directly, and decodes it exactly the way it was encoded. The position of the production elite and the audience thus remain the same; the audience has no independent position. In the second decoding position, the ‘negotiated code’, the audience neither completely agrees nor completely denies the intended encoding: it accepts the authority of the dominant ideology in social culture but, aware of its own interests, refuses to accept the intention of the production elite completely. In the third decoding position, the ‘oppositional code’, the audience understands the meaning the production elite intends to transmit and understands each level of the text but chooses to decode it from an opposite standpoint and assume an oppositional understanding of the cultural product.

Hall’s argument is convincing as it renders support to the role of the masses in today’s cultural milieu where so-called popular culture is dominant. Most contemporary cultural researchers have followed Hall’s three positions of decoding to analyse popular culture. For instance, British media scholar John Fiske took Hall’s theory and developed the decoding initiative of the masses to combat the bourgeois media hegemony.

Fiske suggests that ‘reading’ could be a better term to reflect the masses’ use of cultural products than ‘writing’. He draws the conclusion that ‘the productivity is in the reading rather than the writing’ (1989: 123). In his view, the text of a novel ‘showing the obvious leaves the interior unspoken, unwritten. It makes gaps and spaces in the text for the producerly reader to fill from his or her social experience and construct links between the text and the experience’ (p. 122).

Fiske’s argument is logically sound and consistent. It distinguishes the dominant form of capitalist cultural production from consumers’ active recreation of meaning. On this point, Fiske differs from the Frankfurt school thinkers, who argued that consumers have been increasingly assimilated by the cultural industry. Fiske’s cultural consumption theory developed Hall’s three decodings and he declares: ‘Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry’ (p. 24). Moreover, ‘the creativity of popular culture lies not in the production of commodities so much as in the productive use of industrial commodities. The art of people is the art of “making do”’ (p. 28).

A typical example is his interpretation of the image of Madonna. Fiske pointed out that the image held by the culture industry is not a cultural symbol imposed on the masses because the masses are able to recreate its meaning, making Madonna a positive figure, resisting cultural centralization and thus breaking through the cultural symbolic order defined and imposed by the
patriarchal social elite. Compared with Hall’s attention to the production and dissemination of texts and the ways in which texts are produced in the media industry, Fiske pays more attention to the active consumption and reception of the audience, and emphasizes the people’s construction of pleasure, consumption, and individual identity.

2 From Fiske’s ‘Producerly’ Text to the Interactive Text

Fiske argues that popular culture as ‘a popular text should be producerly’ (p. 103). The term ‘producerly’, Fiske acknowledges, is an extension of Roland Barthes’s division of literary texts into ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ to distinguish two distinct reading practices. For Barthes, readerly texts summon readers who are passive, receptive, and disciplined in nature, and who accept the literal meaning of the text. The readerly text is a closed text that is straightforward and demands no special effort on the part of readers to understand it. Writerly texts, on the other hand, enable readers to rewrite the text and constantly create meaning from it. The writerly text is thus productive and open-ended. The value of the popular cultural text, which Fiske calls the producerly text, lies in inviting readers to participate in the constructing of meaning.

Fiske’s producerly text already contains the character of an interactive text. Fiske focuses mostly on the receiving masses of mass culture in its broad sense. He uses Michael Jackson’s song ‘Thriller’ to illustrate that puns can break linear thinking, obtain free associations, and lead to non-compliance. Fiske believes that this song contains multiple puns. The title of the song has a pun function. It combines the tremor of the horror film and the tremor of orgasm, both of which have a killer meaning. This is a double experience, which is ‘both threatening and liberating, escapes from control’ (Fiske, 1989: 110).

Fiske’s analysis, however enlightening, ignores the fact that interactive texts like popular songs (and indeed street dancing, video games, advertisements, etc.) require the audience to take action or participate, and that in fact that participation is required for meaning to be produced. For example, the meaning of popular songs can only be realized with the social and cultural practice of the masses singing of them, the act that makes it truly popular.

As an interactive text, popular songs share several characteristics. First, the song must be intended to be popular and its meaning to be understandable, not obtuse or obscure. Second, the song is a composite production text. There are five essential components in the song production and circulation, the first four of which originate with the production elite: the lyrics (of the songwriter),
the music (of the composer), the performance (of the singer), the production/distribution (of the production/distribution company), and the singing of (by the mass audience). Only by combining these five components is it possible for a song to achieve popularity. Third, the target of the song is different from the general public. It is what I call above the ‘singing audience’.

Here the ‘singing’ is a modifier of the noun as well as a verb. The duality of this verb determines the duality of the audience of popular music: they are not only listeners, but also singers. Moreover, a basic structure of call and response runs through all popular songs: between the sentences, paragraphs, words, and music, or between the singer and the audience, the ‘I-you’ rubric is everywhere found. This ‘echoing’ becomes a song’s most fundamental social feature when it enters public circulation and consumption. These five characteristics of the popular song are what make it an interactive text, and the function of the singer is distinct from other artists of cultural production.

3 Creative Decoding

The significance of Hall’s oppositional code is that it points out that recipients of cultural products can take the initiative in understanding meaning. Moreover, their interpretation is fundamentally part of a class struggle. Fiske observed that popular culture as a producerly text had begun to transcend Hall’s theory of class antagonism, but he did not propose a specific way of decoding it. As an essential means of communication in contemporary culture, I argue that the interactive text has a strong connotation of class consciousness because realizing the final meaning requires the recipient to take action.

Hall’s dominant-hegemonic code cannot apply here. The audience’s very acceptance of a song is itself an act of self-expression and self-creation. It is impossible to follow completely the pattern prescribed by the production elite (what we might call the ‘primary creation’ of the song); the decoding of a song is shaped by factors such as the audience’s physical conditions, emotional needs, musical tastes and spiritual pursuits. And the success of a song depends on this ‘creative decoding’ on the part of the audience, which transforms popular music and churns out new meaning in the process of ‘secondary creation’.

Creative decoding certainly existed in the past, but it was mainly the patent of critics. The professional interpretation provided by critics is the second text that often offers various meanings of a song. But in the era of popular culture, the mass public have assumed the position of the critics, making their own meaningful interpretations of the text. ‘The singing audience are forever the
actual producers of the meaning of the song. Every time they sing it again, they place the song in a new material medium and a new context’ (Lu, 2007: 288).

Creative decoding is not only applicable to songs but also to other popular art forms such as street dancing, graffiti, and so on. The recipients of pop music or street dancing do not passively accept the ‘text’ passed to them. Unlike the recipients of films or television shows, they might passively ‘read’ the text, understand its meaning, but eventually decide whether to accept and sing it. The initiative may only appear at the end. With interactive texts, recipients must create their own expression, although the singing and dancing of the masses can hardly gain the meaning, power, and reputation of the production elite.

This creative decoding is also applicable, though to a lesser extent, to modern dance. This is why club disco has, since the 1960s, almost completely replaced ballroom dancing – the latter gives dancers less room for self-entertainment and recreation. Similarly, classical music has largely been replaced by popular music because the former requires vocal and instrumental professional training, which gives singers limited freedom. Yet modern dance is secondary to pop songs in terms of audience creativity as it has fewer opportunities for self-performance, and there are fewer ‘original texts’ from which audiences can create mutations in meaning. Thus I consider popular songs the most definitive text of creative decoding.

Contemporary media is developing rapidly and constantly changing. Moreover, new styles such as blogging and social networks are continually emerging, including ‘role participation’ interactive gaming. The increasing dissemination of these interactive texts suggests that creative decoding is becoming more important in social culture today than ever before.

4 The Power of the Recipient

The other is everything that defines and legitimizes the subject, and is why the subject becomes the subject. Without the other, the subject cannot exist. In fact, the subject can only be formed by relying on the other. Equally, the other cannot be the other without the subject, since the former could be understood as a group of signifiers. The two are thus in a confrontational and mutually shaping relationship. Applying this construct to popular music, it might seem obvious that the mass audience is the other and the combined body of the song production elite (the songwriter, composer, singer, production/distribution company) is the subject.
This dynamic of subject and other unfolds dramatically in the spread of popular music. The production elite exchanges intentions with the main body of the singing audience to form a cycle of choices. The production elite (subject) cannot ignore the singing audience (other) but must consider it at all times. Moreover, the song is made meaningful not just by the listening of the audience but by its willingness to sing (reproduce) it. Thus the balance of power in the subject/other dynamic is shifted: the audience becomes the decisive player.

This is where interactive texts like the popular song differ from other cultural texts. We can discern that in any other art, the status of the audience is far less important than the artist. A poet can ignore her reader. Her reader is simply presumed, and the reason for its existence is only theoretical. The same applies to drama. French dramatist Antonin Artaud went as far as completely denying the necessity to consider the audience in theatrical performances:

It’s not that I’m afraid of making the audience die of boredom with transcendental cosmic care. I use profound thoughts to explain theatrical performances, not to impress the ordinary audience, as at least they would not care. But they must be present, and this alone is relevant to us.

ARTAUD, 1958: 89

In avant-garde drama, the audience is merely a helpless assumption. Whether it, according to theatre experimentalists like Artaud, provides feedback is not essential. It just needs to be present. A movie must have an audience, but only from the perspective of commercial operations: directors need paying audiences to survive financially and ensure their investment is not wasted. And the situation is not so very different for novelists and publishers. Although non-profitable novels will not lose the kind of money a filmmaker risks losing, novelists might miss out on their next opportunity to publish and publishers may experience a hit on their profit margins. Yet, ultimately, these production elites only need their audiences or readers to be present. But the situation with popular music is different: a producer of songs aims, as the present paper has been arguing, to keep the masses singing its tune. After all, it is not popular music if it is not popular, or at least strives to be. There might be ‘closet drama’ or ‘drawer literature’, but there cannot be the equivalent for popular music. Thus an active and participating singing audience is a prerequisite for the existence and meaning of the text that has been created.

The singing audience is powerful, more potent than Fiske’s ‘oppositional readers’ of movies. The success of popular music depends on the audience’s acceptance and decision to sing it themselves. It takes a song truly into the
world. As such, we might call the audience here the ‘creative other’ because the song depends on their creative decoding and further reproduction. The main part of a song's production lies not on the ‘producing team’. The receiver does not accept the text but creates it. The other, constructed and defined in this way, is no longer the other in the general sense. It is a creative other.

5 From Intersubjectivity to Com-Subjectivity

Hall (1992: 275–277) distinguished what he saw as the three stages of development in Western thought in the understanding of subjectivity: the Enlightenment subject, the sociological subject, and the postmodern subject. For Hall, the Enlightenment subject was based on a conception of the human person as a centred, unified individual with an inner self, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness, and action. The individual derives both its spiritual essence and its personal identity from this inner self.

The notion of the sociological subject reflected the growing complexity of the modern world and the realization that the subject was not autonomous and self-sufficient but formed in relation to ‘significant others’ in society, who mediated the values, meanings, and symbols of the world he inhabited. Identity is formed in the interaction between self and society. The subject still has an inner core but this is formed and revised in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds ‘outside’ and the identities which they offer. Identity, in this conception, bridges the gap between the personal and public worlds. The subject both projects these cultural identities and internalizes their meanings and values.

Whereas in these two conceptions the subject has a stable and unified identity, in the third stage it has no fixed or essential identity. Rather, the postmodern subject ‘is not composed of one, but multiple, sometimes contradictory or undetermined identities’ (p. 277). It assumes different identities at different times, not unified around a coherent ‘self’. Any sense of a unified identity is but a comforting narrative we have told ourselves. As systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply and constantly shift, we are confronted by a fleeting multiplicity of possible identities that draw us in different directions, always hesitating and finally displaying itself as a broken subject.

In interactive texts such as popular music, subjectivity is not a purely theoretical issue but fundamental to how it operates. Subjectivity in interactive texts can only exist between subjects, when subjects enter subjectivity, or ‘intersubjectivity’. Moreover, the production and dissemination of interactive texts has evolved into a ‘com-subjectivity’. 

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Strictly speaking, this com-subjectivity is only an integrated subjectivity when subjects have sufficient independence. Moreover, ‘the subjectivity of the individual can only become a reality in the subjectivity of the community. It also becomes a reality only in the exertion of a large number of individual subjectivities’ (Yang, 1995: 248). The process in which an interactive text is produced and disseminated into the world is also the process in which individual independent subjects are combined into a common subject.

Let us flesh this idea out. In the process of the production and dissemination of songs that involves the production elite group (songwriters, editors, singers, packaging agencies, production companies, etc.), each step of creative intention is incomplete. The songwriter writes the lyrics, the editor revises them, the composer creates the music, the singer performs and modifies the song, the packager revises and presents it to the world. In the end, no one enjoys the complete freedom of intention. Equally, the audience does not have complete freedom of choice; it cannot ‘choose’ the song. In all cases, the individual subject’s choice is shaped by the ‘song community’ as a whole. Although their subjectivities are independent in presence, they are not sufficient as autonomous individual subjects. Only as a group can they realize the meaning of the song, and that meaning takes place with the song’s spread through society. Individual subjectivities, self and other, must cooperate to complete intention and blend into the single subject, which bears full responsibility for meaning.

Thus in the completion of a song’s meaning in its spread through society, intersubjectivity inevitably leads to a ‘common subjectivity’. The common subject is the coexistence of subjects in society. The ethical commitment between subjects becomes a kind of social responsibility, a connection between self and society, individuals and the community. Even listeners enjoying a song alone in their room are communicating with the community. This community is the ‘song crowd’, created in the act of transmission. They are fans who sing the same song. They do not have to form a chorus, since, even if thousands of miles apart and having never met, they are in their different ways bringing the meaning of the song to completion. It is not ‘collectivism’, since it is immersed in the free will of each subject. Rather, what is created is ‘com-subject’, since it does not require the entire community to make a common choice. On the contrary, it can be formed simply by the subject’s spontaneous enjoyment and willingness to provide their own voice. Songs such as ‘The Same Song’ (同一首歌), sung by Cai Guoqing in 1998, can typically evoke the same voluntary and spontaneous response chanting or humming from a disparate group of people. Such songs possess a very vivid common subjectivity, as is suggested by the title.

A more all-round exposition of this ideal common subjectivity is provided by Jürgen Habermas, a pioneer of the Frankfurt school. The core of Habermas’s
communication theory is that people understand each other through language and behaviour. He believes that:

language actions are not just to explain (or assume) various situations and events, but the speakers can relate to something in the objective world. Language actions also serve to establish (or renew) personal relationships. (1990: 52)

Popular music may be the most suitable example in which to locate this kind of ideal language behaviour and realize this common subjectivity. The song associates all subjects in the production and dissemination process with the experience of the real world and relies on the emotional pleasure that they encounter together. As Habermas says, ‘agreement in the communicative practice of everyday life rests simultaneously on intersubjectively shared propositional knowledge, on normative accord, and on mutual trust’ (p. 135).

The function of the song also establishes the relationship between individuals. This kind of social state is what Habermas calls ‘communicative action’ (p. 116). Through this communicative action, all participants can mutually determine their own actions. They can pursue them without reservation.

Such an ideal communication may be fully realized only in interactive texts.

Once interaction has been restructured in this way, participants can not only take one another’s action perspectives but also exchange the participant perspective for the observer perspective and transform the one into the other.

HABERMAS, 1990: 146

If one should choose an interactive text that perfectly reflects the standard subject theory proposed by Habermas and enables the self and other to blend, the song may be the best example. The fusion of singers and singers can even transform each other, as they exchange positions. For example, here is the Chinese song ‘Superstar’ (lyrics by Chengren Shi):

I laugh when I praise, I frown when I’m hurt.
I have no time for myself as all I can feel is your feeling.
Wherever you go, please bring my soul with you.
As I don’t need it, for it is under your spell.
You’re flash, you’re lighting, you’re the only myth.
You alone take all my love, you’re my Superstar.
You’re my master to adore, I’ve no other choice.
You’re my only love, you’re my Superstar.
笑就歌颂，一皱眉头就心痛.
我没空理会我，只感受你的感受.
你要往哪走？把我灵魂也带走.
它为你着了魔，留着有什么用.
你是电，你是光，你是唯一的神话.
我只爱你.
你主宰，我崇拜，没有更好的办法.

The question is, ‘who’s whose superstar?’ When the band S·H·E sing enthusiastically on the stage, and the crowds happily sing back in chorus, the song dissolves the distance between singers and singing audience. Who is, then, the adored ‘you’? Is it the production elite represented by the singers on the stage, or the singing audiences congregating together in front of it? It is by no means easy to distinguish. Do the singers make the audience sing? Or do the singing audience make the singers stars? Who adores who? The creative decoding of the singers (both on and off stage) determines this common subjectivity, and the generation of song’s meaning is shared.

The relationship between the singer and the singing audience is the final veto of the solipsistic subjectivity, its final demolishing. When the singing audience sing or hum in their hearts, the direction of ‘you’ changes and become a kind of near-narcissistic identity. The ‘I’ they sing is no longer the addressee ‘you’ in the song but becomes the subjectified object, just as the production elite subject represented by the singers becomes objectified.

When the singers address the audience with, ‘I admire you’, they are by no means insincere. ‘Singers’, first of all, is a collective subject composed of many individuals, which have every reason to be adored by the masses. Of course, film or television production teams are also adored. But in popular music, as well as other interactive genres, the production elite need the audience to act in order to push forward and actualize meaning. The main body of the group of production elites and the main body of the group formed by the singer audience meet in the middle and develop the presence of meaning in the act of singing. Popular music completes its intention cycle by waiting for the singer audience to take over and pass the baton of meaning production to more people, thus creating an infinite signifier.

6 Conclusions

Every link in the circulation of interactive texts shares this ‘com-subjectivity’. The interactive text of popular music is reinforced by the recipient’s creative
decoding, the fourth type of decoding that I propose in response to Stuart Hall’s work and which I hope other scholars of cultural studies will explore. This type of decoding, I argue, is sufficient to prove that com-subjectivity may form the theoretical basis for a new pattern of interactive texts in today’s culture.

Before finishing, this essay must answer an inevitable question. If, as I have argued, the interactive paradigm will prove so important in the semiosis of popular music, is it applicable to other cultural activities in society today? I would argue that although it is indeed more explicit and easier to detect in the study of popular music, the interactive pattern is increasingly seen in almost all important genres and subgenres in our cultural life today. The production teams of TV dramas must carefully collect the responses of audiences before writing the next season (or even the next episode). Video games producers hook so many players because they invite them to help craft the stories on their screens. Gamers are not outsiders but act inside the narrative to change the fate of the characters in the story world. The interactive paradigm is arguably even more central to TV dramas and video games than it is to popular music. Creative decoding is increasingly ubiquitous in this electronic and social network driven postmodern world. And it is here to stay.

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