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'Ethnicity and Cultural Difference: Some thematic and political issues on global audience research'

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Ethnicity and Cultural Difference: Some thematic and political issues on global audience research

Abstract

Audience research has made important contributions to our understanding of cross-cultural reception of the media. However, its conceptualisation of the 'audience' in different cultural contexts carries significant problems. This essay argues is that while these two streams of audience study have contributed significantly to the reformulation of media/cultural imperialism, and to the study of the formation of diasporic communities respectively, their conception of ethnicity is extremely problematic both on epistemological and political grounds.

Key words:

Cross-cultural research; ethnicity; diasporic identities

Recently two kinds of research on global audiences have emphasised the role of ethnicity: those engaging with certain assumptions of the cultural imperialism thesis, and those examining the role of the media in the formation of diasporic identities. This essay's main argument is that while these two streams of audience study have contributed significantly to the reformulation of media/cultural imperialism, and to the study of the formation of diasporic communities respectively, their conception of ethnicity is extremely problematic both on epistemological and political grounds. Using Liebes and Katz (1993) and Gillespie (1995) as exemplars of a particular kind of cross-cultural and diasporic audience research, this essay will argue that emphasising racial or ethnic difference as determining audience behaviour is problematic. Given the consolidation of the politics of the New Right (Giroux, 1994), the blending of 'race', ethnicity and culture raises uncomfortable political and conceptual issues. As Gilroy (2004) has observed, the politics of 'race' and ethnicity, always constitutive of debates on multiculturalism, has taken on a new dimension following more recent apprehensions relating to the 'war on terror', particularly in North America, Europe, and Australia. Given this situation, it

seems to me that a great deal of sensitivity is required while dealing with the complex dimensions of ethnic identity, belonging, and transnational cultures.

Tomlinson's (1991, 1999) approach to different conceptions of cultural imperialism is in many ways indicative of the variety of critiques that have been aimed at the thesis. These have included outright attacks that seek to undermine the presumption of unequal power relations that underlies the thesis, attacks which for instance, celebrate the apparent 'semiotic democracy' (Fiske) and the diverse kinds of pleasures that audiences gain from their experience of the media. Other critiques (such as Ang 2001) attempt to refine what are seen to be the excesses of the thesis, as for example the emphasis on the homogenisation of global culture, in an attempt to sustain the fundamental aspects of the thesis while jettisoning its more extravagant claims. Ang (2001) is justifiably suspicious of the at times simplistic anti-Western sentiment that formed a significant part of some of the arguments about cultural imperialism, claiming that the 'West' has become 'decentred' as both an analytical and geographical category. She is however, unwilling to forgo the analytics of contemporary forms of global capital, underlining its incorporation of cultural and racial differences (p.34). By extension, Ang's position relates to the politics of inequality while acknowledging the complexity brought to the global cultural landscape by efforts at promoting discourses of cultural nationalism. As she argues, the issue of nationalist discourse is particularly relevant in the case of East Asia, where the economic growth in the early 1990s contributed to a corresponding increase in national and regional self-confidence which turned critiques of cultural imperialism from that of a largely defensive discourse pointing to a putative 'West' imposing an alien culture on the region to calls for the initiation of a cultural 'counter-offensive', a move that Ang interprets as indicative of a contradictory impulse constituted by both confidence and anxiety (p.41).

Central to the issue of researching audiences across cultures is Ang's observation that 'the "real" significant differences within the region [South East Asia] cannot be easily subsumed within a unifying and unified pan-Asian whole. . .; it is something that Western satellite broadcasters were quick to learn when they realized that there is no such thing as a pan-Asian television audience'. (p.41). The Murdoch-owned Star TV's decision to promote separate services for different languages is a consequence of that realisation – an indication, as Ang remarks, of the 'localization' of globalization, that is, the recognition of the cultural diversity within a region and consequently of divergent audience participation and interest.

This is important to our present concerns in broadly two ways: firstly, the acknowledgement of the precariousness of attempts to locate a cultural whole within a region given the sheer diversity of languages. What is generally regarded as a 'region' however, becomes an interesting issue. Granted that pan-Asianism is problematic, but how are we to regard even pan-Indian or pan-Malaysian, or pan-Indonesian, given the sheer diversity of languages, religions, and other social divisions that characterise those cultures and indeed have played a significant role in the constitution of those cultures?

This question is crucial to the analysis of both the mediation of global culture as well as attempts to promote a variation of cultural nationalism riding on conceptions of a putative national culture. What constitutes a 'national culture' is as a result imbued with issues of the power to define it, the role of elites, and ethnic and cultural difference within a nation-state. The legitimacy of various forms of cultural nationalism consequently becomes questionable. The second way in which this acknowledgement of cultural difference within a region is important for us is more closely linked to the debates we are covering in this essay – that is, the diversity of global audiences and the questionable assumptions regarding ethnicity and cultural difference that underlie a few well-known international audience studies that seek to interrogate the claims of media or cultural imperialism, or to trace the links between diaspora, cultural change, and ethnicity.

Challenging the idea of global media as vehicles of particular ideologies, with its attendant assumption regarding international audiences who are more often than not read into the analysis of texts as ideologically loaded, there has developed more recently a stream of audience studies which set out to explore the ways in which audiences engage with different texts. Building on advances in audience ethnography and sophisticated analyses of qualitative data generated through innovative research methods, these studies have begun to offer interesting insights into audience behaviour, interpretations, and preferences with regard to mediated culture. The guiding assumption in these studies is that audiences 'actively' engage with media texts, and that this engagement is informed and influenced by social and cultural factors. I have argued elsewhere that these do not offer sufficiently complex explanations of how socio-cultural factors influence audience interpretations (Harindranath, 2000), but in the present context it is worth exploring the achievements and problems in such research.

Ethnic difference and interpretative practice

One study that is often referred to by media scholars as offering the definitive challenge to the cultural imperialism thesis (as espoused for example, in Tomlinson 1991), in particular the uncritical assumptions regarding international audiences is Liebes and Katz's (1993) examination of the ways in which 'ethnically homogeneous' groups of families engaged with specific episodes of *Dallas*. The main aim of this research was to investigate the ways in which 'the melodrama of a fictional family in Texas is viewed, interpreted and discussed by real families throughout the world.' (p.4). The primary rationale behind Liebes and Katz's choice of families representing putatively diverse ethnicities was that such diversity constituted different symbolic resources and values systems which could then be studied in their interaction with the episodes of the soap opera. Here was a text that was demonstrably different in terms of the centrality of its action and its main characters and the centrality of its action being located in Texas, culturally removed as it were, from most of the selected group of audiences. This cultural distance did not however, affect its popularity among diverse global audiences. In what

ways then, would cultural differences affect the ways in which audiences responded to the characters' motivations and actions? On the face of it this seems a reasonable proposition.

The main argument underlying Liebes and Katz's exploration of diverse audience responses to *Dallas* is the potential for critical readings among different audience groups:

'Having long assumed that the texts of popular culture inscribe themselves hegemonically in the defenceless minds of the readers, critical theorists realized that their theory left no room at all for social change. How to explain feminism for example, if culture is totally mobilized to maintain the status quo? In recent years, therefore, critical theorists. . . have made room for alternate readings, thus acknowledging that the ordinary viewer, not only the theorist, may know how to read oppositionally.' (1993, p.18).

Coinciding with this conceptual challenge to the power of the text over the reader/viewer came the development of 'new audience research' built on qualitative research methodologies seeking to trace the different meanings and pleasures audiences gained in their encounters with television and film. The attempted correlation between the progressive politics informing critical theorists and the empirical demonstrations of alternative and 'oppositional' audience responses however, remains at best tenuous. Part of the problem here lies with the difficulty in demonstrating how alternative readings of television fiction or documentary translate into cultural or political practice that challenges the status quo. Another relevant issue here is the vexed one of what constitutes a culture. In their attempt to replicate a putative global audience from different cultural groups, Liebes and Katz chose to work with ethnically diverse groups: Arabs, Russian Jews, kibbutzniks, and Moroccan Jews within Israel, comparing their responses to specific episodes of *Dallas* with each other and with those of an American group. Once again, on the face of it their claim to be replicating the microcosm of a global culturally diverse audience seems well founded. What is less convincing however, is their suggestion that ethnicity, seen here as being constituted by race, determines audience responses.

Liebes and Katz generated interesting data which suggest clear lines of interpretive difference running along the fault lines of 'ethnic' difference among the various groups. In their assessment of the groups' retellings of an episode of *Dallas* they claim for instance:

'The two more traditional groups – Arabs and Moroccan Jews – prefer linearity. . . They select the action-oriented subplot for attention, defining the hero's goals and his adventures in trying to achieve them. They tell the story in closed form as if it were an inevitably progression, and the characters they describe are rigidly stereotyped; indeed, they are often referred to by role – family role, of course – rather than by name. . . . The Russians speak of the episode in terms of themes or messages. They ignore the story in favor of exposing the overall principles which they perceive as repeated relentlessly, and which, in their opinion, have a manipulative intent. . . . Americans and kibbutzniks tell

the story psychoanalytically. They are not concerned with the linearity of the narrative but with analysing the problems of characters intrapersonally and interpersonally. Their retellings are open, future-oriented, and take into account the never-ending quality of the soap-opera genre.' (pp.80-81).

The reasons for this difference, according to Liebes and Katz, is to do with the 'traditional' nature of Arab and Moroccan cultures, the inherent critical attitude of Russian Jews, and finally the 'comparative security' of the 'modern' American and kibbutzim groups. In framing their discussion of the different takes on the episode of Dallas by different groups along racial lines, Liebes and Katz reproduce a monolithic conception of ethnicity. Their discussion delimits the mutability of ethnicity as opposed to the biographically determined category of 'race', what Fanon referred to as the 'corporeal malediction' of racial markers. Given the context of their research – Israel - the reference to Arab and Moroccan communities as 'traditional' falls uncomfortably close to what Said (1986) represented as 'the ideology of difference' which positions the Arab community within Israel as homogeneous and culturally backward (see Harindranath 2000 for a more detailed discussion of this point).

In a significant contribution to the assessment of the constitution of racism and to debates on difference and equality, Malik (1996) presents a nuanced and closely argued case for the approach to 'race' as a social category rather than the insistence of it as cultural difference that characterise current 'culture wars' (Giroux, 1994). The insistence on racial difference as constituted by immutable cultural difference is in danger of reproducing in a different form earlier nineteenth century depictions of biological difference as underlying racial diversity, which were given spurious 'scientific' validity by Social Darwinism. The privileging of cultural difference as an immutable, defining, and essential category of putative racial difference collapses 'race' into culture. The argument that such cultural ('racial') differences are fixed and static 'reveals a view of culture as a predetermined, natural phenomenon. . . [The] concept of race arises through the naturalisation of social differences. Regarding cultural diversity in natural terms can only ensure that culture acquires an immutable character, and hence becomes a homologue for race.' (Malik, 1996. p 150).

Despite the best intentions of the researchers in presenting their data and analysis as an exploration of the near global popularity of a typically American text such as *Dallas*, and as a challenge to the often assumed belief that mediated texts such as American television programmes are accepted uncritically by international audiences, the conceptual rigidity of their division of their respondents into ethnically self-contained groups has unfortunate and damaging consequences. The tautology inherent in dividing audience groups in this way and then arguing that their responses to television reinforce their ethnicity presents two different elisions: it elides the distinction between ethnicity and 'race' and then presents 'race' in terms of culture. Unlike the concept of 'race', used to denote apparently immutable biological differences, 'ethnicity' as a term is generally considered to refer to mutable, more fluid differences between groups of people in terms

of cultural practices and beliefs, thereby avoiding the problematic aspects of 'race'. In practice however, as Malik argues, the terms are often interchangeably. As he demonstrates, even sociologists like Giddens make the fundamental error of presenting ethnicity along racial lines in statements such as 'most modern societies include numerous different ethnic groups. In Britain, Irish, Asian, West Indian, Italian and Greek immigrants, among others, form ethnically distinct communities within a wider society.' (quoted in Malik, p.176), which delineates various immigrant groups along racial or national lines while purporting to consider them in terms of more changeable criteria that constitute ethnicities.

Liebes and Katz's analysis similarly confound the distinction between 'race' and 'ethnicity' as conceptually different categories. Presented as a defining characteristic, the distinction between race and ethnicity collapses in their case when for instance Moroccan Jews are considered to have 'traditional' values as opposed to the 'modern' Americans or kibbutzniks. Furthermore, used this way ethnicity loses its mutability and becomes an essentialist, particularist concept which defines and delimits the behavioural aspects of racially different communities, but simultaneously avoids the pitfalls of defining difference along 'race' by making the dubious link between ethnicity (used in this instance as conceptually similar to 'race') and culture. The elision between 'race' and cultural difference has been commented on before (see chapters 6 and 7 in Malik). Given that Liebes and Katz's stated objective was to challenge ideas of media imperialism and the alleged homogenisation of diverse global cultures however, this elision takes on a different significance. In claiming that the cultures of Moroccan Jews or Arabs have something immutable, essential and unchanging their research comes close to 'new racism' in which, according to Gilroy 'culture is conceived along ethnically absolute lines, not as something intrinsically fluid, changing, unstable, and dynamic, but as a fixed property of social groups rather than a relational field in which they encounter one another and live out social, historical relationships. When culture is brought into contact with race it is transformed into a pseudobiological property of communal life.' (quoted in Giroux 1994:36).

As noted earlier, in a later book Gilroy (2005) underlines the enduring legacies of the politics of cultural difference, which have, particularly since September 11 2001, intersected with issues of national security and 'race', and with the reassessment of immigration and multicultural policies. Given such developments, eliding 'race' and cultural difference becomes even more problematic.

Ethnicity, media consumption, and diasporic identities

Liebes and Katz's reification of 'race' as a defining category and the subsequent collapsing of 'race' into culture as synonymous concepts is mirrored in some of the literature on diaspora groups and the media. In their anxiety to explore the links between the collective identities of such groups and their experience and use of the media, a few

of the studies similarly elevate 'race' to normative levels, that is, racial identity becomes a self-fulfilling category. In terms of media audiences, this becomes in essence a problematic formula suggesting that certain ethnic groups watch particular programmes and films that then contribute to the maintenance of a collective identity in those ethnic groups. Most damagingly such circular arguments, in their refusal to recognise the relevance of the politics of location of various groups in a diaspora, amount to a disavowal of the critical issues of histories of migration, and the localised histories marking the changing relationship between such communities and the host culture. It is through such histories that identities are forged, contributing to differences between generations of immigrants, and between new arrivals and older immigrants. The 'social and historical relationships' that Gilroy emphasises as constituting cultural encounters is neglected in some of the studies on diaspora and the media.

Gillespie's (1995) study of 'South Asian' youngsters and their media use is a case in point. Arguing that 'the media and cultural consumption – the production, "reading" and use of representations – play a key role in constructing and defining, contesting and reconstituting national, "ethnic" and other cultural identities' (p.11), Gillespie attempts to explore the ways in which the practice of television consumption among young South Asians in the London borough of Southall is indicative of and contribute to cultural change. That is, how they use the media to negotiate an identity that simultaneously addresses the desire to relate with their peers within and outside their 'ethnicity' while dealing with the pressures of parental concerns and values. Her main focus is on an ethnographic account of every day, domestic practices among these youth as audiences of a diverse range of television programmes and formats, and of the role of 'TV talk' – 'the embedding of TV experiences in conversational forms and flows [which] becomes a feasible object of study only when fully ethnographic methods are used in audience research.' (p.23).

As in the case of Liebes and Katz (1993), Gillespie's is an important study, in this instance making a valuable contribution to debates on the ethnography of diaspora cultures and identities, and those on the complexities of audience negotiations with and appropriations of the media. Her laudable aim is to avoid the political and methodological pitfalls of construing diaspora cultures in terms of binary oppositions or of putative 'purity', by conceptualising 'the term "ethnicity" in the sense of an array of strategic positionings in a field of differences, and [adopting] a dynamic concept of culture, in the hope of challenging in some small way the limiting, paralysing or destructive effects of such binary thinking.' (p.207). This challenge takes its cue from Hall's (1992) formulation of ethnic identity as discursively and contextually constituted by history, language and culture. The discursive aspect of identity formation makes the 'strategic positionings' referred to by Gillespie possible, particularly in relation to the media which are then seen to contribute, as Gillespie demonstrates, a variety of possibilities for audience groups to 'translate' appropriate and 'indigenise' strategic readings which are then used to refine their notions of local cultures and group (ethnic) identities. Seen from this perspective, audience groups 'read' media texts along ethnically influenced ways, while at the same

time these readings engender constructions of ethnic identities. For instance, Gillespie argues that the availability of diverse media

‘encourages young people to compare, contrast and criticise the cultural and social forms represented to them by their parents, by significant others present in their daily lives, and by significant others on the screen. This is the kind of context in which the construction of new ethnic identities becomes both an inevitable consequence and a necessary task.’ (p.206).

What is being proposed here is the apparent effectiveness of a cosmopolitan encounter with diverse cultures – here in a mediated form – in the redefinition of identities. Apart from the problems of the circularity of the argument – that different ethnic groups read media differently which then contributes to a reworking of their identities, the focus on ‘race’ as a defining category to the neglect of other factors such as class and gender is problematic particularly in the context of diasporas.

This elevation of ‘race’ as a determining factor in audiences’ reception of and engagement with television texts is problematic in both political and epistemological terms.

Politically, the reification of ‘race’ amounts to a refusal to recognise the significance of patterns of inequality embedded in socio-cultural factors that influence engagement with the media as well as access to cultural resources (Harindranath, 1998). Construed as a socially coherent and significant group whether they be South Asians (which is too broad a category in itself) or Moroccan Jews or African Americans, such communities are then given certain defining characteristics, either overtly – as in the case of Liebes and Katz’s reference to Moroccans and Arabs as ‘traditional’, or less directly but nevertheless in a discursively significant manner, as for instance the South Asian teenagers’ response to *Neighbours*, or to television advertisements of consumer goods. The question of whether that defines them as South Asian or as teenagers is not sufficiently explored, and Gillespie’s study is discursively positioned in such a way that it seems to suggest the former. Given this disavowal, such superficial acknowledgement of ethnic or racial difference hides more than it reveals. For instance the gender and class politics intrinsic to any diasporic community is not taken into account, even at times glossed over in the attempt to demonstrate the role of the media in identity formation. While on the surface Gillespie’s project differs from that of Liebes and Katz in the important sense that she conceives of diasporic cultural identity and fluid and dynamic, along the lines advocated famously by Hall (1990), her consideration of South Asians as a monolithic category threatens to undermine her project.

As Brah (1996) and others have argued, diasporic identities are constituted not only by who travels, ‘where, when, how, and under what circumstances’ (p.182), but also that they are ‘at once local and global. They are networks of transnational identifications encompassing “imagined” and “encountered” communities.’ (p.196). Most importantly, diaspora is a *relational* term, with implications of power relations both between and within diasporic communities, as well as between diasporic and host communities. The

emphasis on the complexity of the historical circumstances of migration – as refugees, or indentured labourers, or skilled migrants, etc – as well as the relations between diasporic and host cultures, not least in terms of racist practices, figure significantly in the formation of diasporic identities. Tracing the complex routes and histories of migration that make up the Indian diaspora for instance, Mishra (1996, 2002) makes a distinction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ diasporas, marked respectively by migration as indentured labour and by economic migration – the ‘diaspora of plantation labour’, and the ‘diaspora of late capital’. The second moment, mostly post-1960s, ‘is very different from the traditional nineteenth – and early twentieth – century diaspora of classic capital, which was primarily working class and connected to plantation culture [examined in great detail by V. S. Naipaul in his novel *The House of Mr. Biswas*]. The diaspora of late capital has now become an important market of popular cinema as well as a site of its production.’ (2002, p. 236). To promote a putative and unitary Indianness as common to Indian communities in Europe, the Caribbean, Malaysia, Kuwait, and Fiji is therefore problematic.

Diaspora as a concept productively deconstructs the reification of ‘race’ as a signifying category. As Gilroy (1993, 2000) has brilliantly argued in the case of the ‘Black Atlantic’, the complexities that such heterogeneous histories of mobility bring to diaspora formation requires a re-thinking of place, geography, and genealogy in terms of hybrid and non-territorial identities: ‘As an alternative to the metaphysics of ‘race’, nation, and bounded culture coded into the body, diaspora is a concept that problematises the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging. It disrupts the fundamental power of territory to define identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness.’ (2000, p.124). This extends Clifford’s (1997) formulation, in which diasporic communities retain a creative tension with national spaces and identities, constructing public spheres and forming collective consciousnesses that transcend national boundaries and form alliances with similar others elsewhere.

The disregard of the material histories that define the reality of migrant experience in different sites in the search for a putative ‘transnational’ culture threatens to undermine the intellectual legitimacy of racial politics in these different locations. Highlighting the apparent commonalities of experiences of cultural consumption across a diverse community grouped predominantly by their ethnic or racial aspects belies the complexity of the cultural and social formations of such communities. Such uncritical use of ‘race’ as a defining characteristic teeters at the edge of a particular kind of racial profiling – suggesting for instance, that Moroccan Jews employ ‘traditional’ values to the assessment of the actions of characters from *Dallas* is but a step away from portraying the group as backward or at best ‘different’ from allegedly ‘modern’ communities. Can the racialization of the apparent ‘clash of civilization’ be far behind? This is not to suggest of course, that media scholars such as Liebes and Katz deliberately set out to divide multicultural societies along racial lines, but merely to underline the dangers of focussing exclusively on race as determining behaviour, including television viewing of film watching. Given the strong racial aspects underlying various immigration, policing, and

legal aspects of contemporary global politics, not to mention the obvious perils of ethnically defined nationalism, it is vital to be especially vigilant against contributing to the politics of difference constituted along such lines.

As mentioned earlier, a lot of these problems stem from epistemological inadequacies: it is a mistake to conceive of 'race' as a determining category in the exploration of the practices of consumption of the media and how these are linked to identity formation. A significant contributor to such conceptualisations is the lack of an adequate theoretical explanation for the link between social groups and media reception, that is, the answer to the question, how do social or cultural factors impinge on the way people respond to film or television? One can equally pose the question the other way round: in what ways do particular kinds of responses to film and television characterise social or cultural factors? For instance, the popularity of mainstream Indian (Hindi) films among different groups of South Asians in Europe, North America and Australia is indicated by the regular screening of such films in city cinemas. But how far does that interest, leave alone the more intricate and complicated issues of different audience responses to them, characterise South Asian ethnicity? Does my lack of interest in popular Hindi cinema make me an exceptional South Asian as well as a snob? What does it signify in terms of my 'ethnic' identity? It seems to me that promoting my responses to mainstream Hindi films as somehow contributing to my 'Indianness' is clearly wrong.

Gillespie (2000) argues that the similarities that she sees between her ethnographic study in London and Mankekar's (1993) examination of diverse audience responses to the televising of the Indian epic *Mahabharatha* is a clear indication of the validity of her findings: '[t]he parallels in the readings of Mankekar's informants and my own are striking' (p.176). Such insistence on the shared interpretive frameworks that transcend national boundaries underlines the problems with Gillespie's conception of an alleged Indianness that subsumes and overcomes differences within communities. Without a competent exploration of the political and social factors underlying both similarities and differences in audience responses, such stances become problematic. Contrary to the Gillespie's claims however, Mankekar's exceptional analysis (1999) of the textual privileging of specific patriarchal and nationalistic discourses in the Indian television serialisation of the *Ramayana*, and the diversity of responses to it from disparate Indian groups demonstrates a reassuring degree of sensitivity to the political significance of both the serial as well as audience interpretations and evaluations of principal characters. Far from presenting audience responses as a unified and singular take on the serial, Mankekar's study reveals nuanced multiple positions along the lines of gender, religious, regional, and linguistic differences which highlight various points of divergence from assessing the patriarchal underpinning of Sita (the main female character) as an ideal woman, to interrogations of different versions of the epic, as for instance between the serialised version and the one by the Tamil poet Kamban. The discussions sufficiently demonstrate her view that "popular" narratives [such as the television serialisation of *Ramayana*] do *not* yield an infinite range of interpretations. At the same time, the heterogeneous responses of viewers (including Hindu viewers) reveal that the "popu;ar" is

not a monolithic category: viewers modes of engagement were shaped by their life experiences, gender, and class.' (p.196; emphasis in the original). She presents several instances of this diversity in modes of engagement. For example, in terms of class difference, 'although some upper-class viewers complained that the *Ramayan's* sets . . . were kitschy and audy, many lower-middle-class viewers I worked with described the sets as "glorious" or "magnificent"'. And that 'while upwardly mobile and English educated Uma Chandran complained that she was "bored" with the "plastic expressions" of Ram and Sita, Poonam Sharma, who was precariously middle-class, said: "What was amazing about the *Ramayan* serial was that Ram and Sita looked exactly like I had imagined.'" (p.191-92). Even in terms of aesthetic assessment therefore, issues such as class and educational background figure as important influences.

In other words, what emerges as significant in Mankekar's study is the diversity of cultural positioning with regard to the serial, depending on the different cultural resources that various audience were able and willing to call upon. Given the emergence of Hindu fundamentalism in the late 1980s which was rapidly consolidated as the validation of a form of cultural nationalism and a political force from the early 1990s, Mankekar's work underlines the relevance of such research which go beyond either merely challenging the media/cultural imperialism thesis, or the gestural aspects of studying diasporic groups conceived on notions of ethnic absolutism.

Two other studies may be mentioned here as emphasising the importance of factors other than racial difference are Strelitz [2002] and Harindranath (1998). Seeking to examine the role of consumption in identity formation and the impact of global media on local cultures, Strelitz's analysis of the spread of global culture among students in a university in South Africa undermines the easy correlation between 'race' and media consumption and reception, thereby erasing the clear lines traced by Liebes and Katz (1993) and Gillespie (1995) between race/ethnicity and response to the media, and profoundly complicating the analytics of international audience research. Crucially, what emerges in his research as reported in Strelitz (2002) is the distinction between on the one hand urban, middle class African students educated in superior schools, comfortable with English, and in many ways similar to their white counterparts, and on the other 'homeland' viewers, that is, the group of African students from 'rural peasant or working class' backgrounds and inferior schools, who created 'their own television viewing space '(which they refer to as 'homeland') in which they regularly viewed largely local productions (p.459). Strelitz identifies several sites of difference ranging from the feeling of estrangement among 'homeland' students not only from white classmates but also from the urban middleclass African students whom they perceive as so markedly different from them in terms of cultural tastes and their preference for English. 'The "homeland" represents a psychological space within which these students can re-confirm and live out their feelings of difference. . . .The "homeland", where only Xhosa is spoken, is a space which enables these students to interact with each other confidently, free from the ridicule of the better educated, urban, middle class students.' (pp.466-67). The difference was further confirmed by their choice of programs to watch: their preference, argues

Strelitz, is informed by their eagerness to make sense of the structural inequalities inherent in South African society.

Strelitz's study not only challenges the convenient use of 'race' as a marker for behaviour, but also supports his insistence of the importance of 'the interplay between media consumption and other social factors – such as social location, social networks and so on – in the construction of social identity.' (p.473). That education and class are significant contributors to and definers of social location was confirmed in my analysis (Harindranath, 1998, 2000) of the differences between Indian and British audiences' interpretations of documentaries.

Linking media spectatorship and interpretive strategies to 'race' alone, whether in the search for the elusive international audience or diaspora identity is therefore clearly inadequate. Not only do other factors such as education and class impinge on the access, preference and response to global media products, but the formation of identity has to take into account other kinds of social and cultural elements that constitute the life-worlds of different communities. Straubhaar's useful concept of 'cultural proximity' is valid here, particularly the suggestion that the impact of global media on local cultures is uneven. But whereas he associates culture with particular geographical zones, both my study and Strelitz's strongly indicate the presence in different locales of audiences who have the willingness and the cultural resources to engage in different ways to global (Western) television programmes and films, so much so that there is evidence of a clear preference for such fare. The uneven distribution of cultural resources and capacities impinge on audience choices, pleasures and responses. Clearly then, it is no longer valid to either consider entire populations in developing regions as a monolithic group of audience, or to make clear cut distinctions between 'Western' and 'non-Western' audiences on the basis of geographical locality. The emergence of studies such as Strelitz and others (see for example, Tufte, 2002) offer clear indications of changes in audience research in terms of accommodating the complex interlocking dynamics of 'race', class, gender, and ethnicity.

Dirlik's (1997) distinction between on the one hand the hegemonic culturalism that characterizes ideological relations *between* the West and the non-West, and on the other the one that operates *within* the non-West is crucial here in order to trace the complexities and overdeterminations imposed by class and gender issues in both diasporic and 'national' or ethnic cultures. As he argues, 'culturalist hegemony within the context of global relations is a "double-hegemony": it involves, in addition to the relationship between the West and the non-West, the hegemonic relations within non-Western societies. The interplay between these two creates a complexity over the question of hegemony.' (p.37). The consensual homogeneity of discursive 'ethnicity' removes from attention the material aspects of diasporic and national cultural and social formations that is constitutive of the complexity of the experience of diaspora or ethnicity. That is, considerations of ethnicity as delineating a homogenous whole, either in terms of diaspora or nation, to be found both in the work of those who promote the

notion of cultural imperialism as well as in research studies highlighting the multiple interpretations by culturally differentiated audiences, overlook the influence of the inequality intrinsic to the distribution of cultural resources within these putative homogeneous groups. Tsing's (2000/2002) distinction between 'cosmopolitans' and 'poor migrants' seems apposite here: 'Both cosmopolitans and poor migrants erase the specificity of their cultural tracks, although for different reasons: poor migrants need to fit in the worlds of others; cosmopolitans want more of the world to be theirs.' (p. 469). This recognition of disparities within diasporic groups is significant in two ways: firstly, it offers a conceptual framework with which to grasp the cultural differences within these alleged monolithic groups identified purely by their 'race' or nationality. Secondly, it highlights Dirlik's observation on hegemonic relations *within* non-Western cultures and states which need to be accommodated in audience studies seeking to examine the claims of cultural homogenisation through global media, and by those interested in looking at the media and diasporic communities. In terms of the latter, as Gillespie (2000) rightly points out, a 'multi-sited ethnography' goes some way towards addressing the complexities that attend to transnational communities. However, if we follow Rouse's (1991/2002) argument that migrants occupy a transnational rather than a particular national space, we need to move beyond considering audiences in specific locales and their reception of mediated texts, and towards examining the ways in which communities use communication technologies to establish and maintain relations within what Rouse refers to as the transnational migrant circuit. This requires an epistemological and methodological reappraisal of transnational audience research.

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Contact (by email): [Ramaswami Harindranath](mailto:Ramaswami.Harindranath@luton.ac.uk)

