

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

#### **Anthropology and Feature Film: Text, Production and Reception**

Considering the neglect of the anthropological inquiry into fiction film, first of all, it is worthwhile to conduct a brief review of anthropological explorations into feature films as cultural texts. Ruth Benedict, in her book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), has referred to the usefulness of Japanese films to study Japanese culture "with the practical goal of better estimation or prediction of their members' behaviour, collectively or individually" (Weakland 1975: 236-237). Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites have used American, English, and French films of the late 1940s as cultural data in their book, *Movies* (1950). Margaret Mead and Rhoda Metraux's *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (1953) consists of theories on content analysis of movies from cultural aspects and film analyses contributed by Martha Wolfenstein (on an Italian film), Rhoda Metraux, Geoffrey Gorer, Jane Belo (on French films), John Hast Weakland (on Cantonese films), Margaret Mead (on a Soviet film), Vera Schwarz (Alexandrova) (on Soviet films), and Gregory Bateson (on Nazi film). Later, John Weakland (1966a, 1966b, 1971, 1972) continued research

on the anthropological analysis of feature films. He suggests that fiction films be taken as "projecting images of human social behaviour and these images be the first object of study" (Weakland 1975: 233). According to John Weakland,

fiction films . . . though differing from the reality of detailed records of actual behaviour. [They] may reflect cultural premises and patterns of thought and feeling . . . Actual significance can only be determined, once film images are discerned by studying these in relation to the film makers, their audiences, and to other information about their subject matters. (Weakland 1975: 233)

One of the merits feature films have for a cultural investigation, he argues, is that feature films tend to deal with relatively basic and simple themes because of their nature as mass media targeted for popular audiences. He concludes that feature films are "cultural documents" by definition and good tools for anthropological analysis.

In the last few years, several anthropological works have been devoted to the study of Japanese films, Indonesian films and Indian films. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney analyzed the popular Japanese film *Tampopo* (1986), directed by Juzo Itami to show "the ambivalent self of the contemporary Japanese" (1990). She treats *Tampopo* as a symbolic community and proposes an imaginary ethnographic study of the cinematic world of *Tampopo* just as an

anthropologist would conduct an ethnographic study in the real world. She aims to show how to read the film as a cultural text and interpret symbols and symbolic behaviors such as noodles, a peach, a raw egg, or spaghetti eating as they occur in *Tampopo*. She argues that *Tampopo* offers "a vivid illustration of the current effort by the Japanese to redefine themselves in relation to the West" (Ohnuki-Tierney 1990). According to her, her own film analysis is, in Geertz's sense, a "thick description" comparable to an anthropological interpretation of a culture in a society.

Karl Heider, an ethnographic filmmaker and visual anthropologist, has attempted a cultural analysis of Indonesian films and national culture in his book, *Indonesian Cinema: National culture on screen* (1991). According to him,

movies are cultural texts, embodying within their frames the entire range of cultural behavior from artifacts to motivation . . . cultural statements, communicating messages to huge audiences . . . are *cultural carriers*, as well, bringing their messages to an entire nation or language area or even the world, although different audiences may read different messages from the same statement. (emphasis added) (Heider 1991: 1)

In his book, Heider distinguishes film as an active agent and passive product. He argues that the active version of understanding film considers film as communication, which "opens up questions of intentionality of the sender and

awareness of the received" (Heider 1991: 2). The passive version sees films as products of the culture and looks for their "internal structure" as it derives from culture. His book is concerned with the second approach and attempts to examine Indonesian movies and Indonesian culture to show "how cultural principles shape the movies and, sometimes, how the movies may influence the culture" (Heider 1991: 7).

Assuming that national Indonesian culture is emerging and changing, he argues that "Indonesian cinema is a powerful vehicle for the development, shaping, and diffusion of a national Indonesian culture" (Heider 1991: 134). He attempts to identify specific patterns of Indonesian culture in cinema, Indonesian genres, plots, tale types and narrative conventions, and he concludes that Indonesian films are becoming more expressive of the emergent national culture in terms of their deeper features:

The film are increasingly concerned with the specifically Indonesian shape of modernization and development, they are more often retelling the stories of Indonesian history and legend, and above all they are more involved in working out these particular Indonesian cultural themes as they construct a national culture. (Heider 1991: 140)

K. N. Sahay, in the *Visual Anthropology in India and Its Development* (1993), also asserts the significance of feature films for anthropological inquiry and illustrates a

methodology of selecting and analyzing Indian fiction films, especially "new-wave" Indian films and other realistic films (including T.V. films), from cultural perspectives. Sahay points out the lack of anthropological interest in feature film and critically questions

whether a media which communicates so powerfully and wields such a pervasive influence on life be set aside by anthropologist merely as a non-serious thing to merit serious attention and just as a source of entertainment? Whether it is devoid of anthropological significance? (Sahay 1993: 40-41)

Even though fiction films are intended as entertainment by their original creators, he argues, fiction films function beyond mere entertainment and contain resourceful cultural symbols and discourses. Therefore, they should be treated as "cultural documents" and "cultural carriers":

Some of the fiction films reflect in adequate measure various types of socio-cultural realities. While on the one hand these films may be considered to be a type of 'cultural document', on the other, a powerful medium of communication that wields considerable influence on socio-cultural norms of a society. (Sahay 1993: 37-38)

Sahay further emphasizes that fiction films are more manageable for cultural inquiry because they usually present specific themes, characters, behaviors, stories and segments of life:

it is significant to note that . . . fiction film . . . can be best studied as supplementaries to conventional anthropological studies . . . some specific and sporadic cultural materials may very

well be culled out from these films to give us a general understanding of the society. But if adequate number of suitable films could be found out from a society for anthropological analysis, they can also very well constitute integral part of research relating to specific aspects of life. (Sahay 1993: 42)

He goes on to propose a practical guide for the cultural analysis of fiction films. For the anthropological analysis of films, he categorizes fiction films into three groups: films of ethnographic orientation, films of sociological orientation and films that "present established or changing models of life" (Sahay 1993: 62). And then, he suggests six basic criteria for selecting films:

1. The theme of the film selected for study should be other than melodramatic and "formula-film."
2. The main theme of the film should relate to any distinct and concrete aspect of life and culture in a society.
3. The script of the film should be based on literary work of quality in which one finds well constructed meaningful stories and characters.
4. A fiction film should preferably be an award winning film or in some way acclaimed or honoured.
5. Acquisition of the copy of the film by National Film Archive, reputed institutions or government departments for educational or similar other purposes.
6. The director (or producer) of the film should be a film-maker known for honesty, imagination and realism in the treatment of films. (Sahay 1993: 64)

He argues that a fiction film may be divided into six major components for analysis: script, setting, acting, presentation, music and message. According to him, the film may be further analyzed in terms of a set of three criteria: "conformity to traditional values, norms and standards," "naturalness" and "justification" (Sahay 1993: 66).

Sahay notes that, after analyzing a film within the above frameworks, the researcher needs to consider the film in its totality and demonstrate major findings by way of the following observations on various socio-cultural elements reflected in the film: the material culture, customs, practices, belief system, value system, ideals, other ethnographic material, real socio-cultural problems, significant message or any other point of anthropological significance (Sahay 1993: 66-67).

Finally, he proposes that the researcher categorize the analyzed films on the basis of themes to demonstrate appropriateness of films as cultural documents and sources of awareness:

Thus, fiction films not only just constitute cultural documents, but can be very well utilized in creating an awareness and stirring the conscience of the masses over a given issue, and raising their level of aspiration. (Sahay 1993: 67)

On the other hand, the feature film production, industry and reception have rarely been the subject of anthropological inquiry. Hortense Powdermaker's *Hollywood the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers* (1950) is a rare but good example of an anthropological study of the film-making community. This ethnographic study of Hollywood as a movie-making community focuses on its own social system, organizational structure, roles of participants, power, hierarchies, goals and conflicts. In her book, Powdermaker is concerned with the social system of Hollywood, and the hypothesis of her research is that the social system in which Hollywood movies are produced significantly influences their content and meaning. She is especially interested in key production personnel who are most influential in filmmaking in relation to American society. Therefore, her research of Hollywood is geared toward "a study of the locus of power and its exercise, in the taboos which circumscribe all production, in the values as represented in goals, in historical and economic factors, and in the introduction of new technology and new ideas with resulting conflicts between old and new" (Powdermaker 1950: 9-10). Her book covers from producers, directors, and screenwriters to actors and stars who are the most influential persons in

the production of movies in Hollywood. However, it does not describe in any detail the creative aspects of other production staff such as cameramen, set designers, musicians, costume and make-up artists because they have relatively little influence on the content and meaning of movies:

Since no social system can be understood without a knowledge of the people through whom it functions, the personalities of those who sit in the front office, of producers, directors, actors, writers, and others, were observed. Their backgrounds, goals, ways of thinking, frustrations and compensations were all significant. Equally important were their relationships with each other, and among the key ones were those of producer-writer, director-actor, and of all with the front office. All influence the creative aspects of movie production and leave their imprint on the movies. (Powdermaker 1950: 10)

Other conditioning factors such as financing, distribution and exhibition are discussed only incidentally, since the study aims to explain the production in Hollywood in the book.

While Powdermaker's study exemplifies the production and industry of feature film in the Western country, Sara Dickey's *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (1993) offers an example of a non-Western tradition of cinematic activities. The book analyzes cinema in Madurai, urban South India, in its socio-cultural context. Dickey is

mainly concerned with how filmmakers and urban poor viewers together negotiate the content and meaning of Tamil cinema.

She argues that her study is class-based research because class identity is fundamental to the filmmaker and urban viewers' participation in Tamil cinema. According to her, Tamil filmgoers and filmmakers identify themselves on the basis of economic, social, cultural and political factors. In order to understand the relationship between film producers and consumers, she argues, issues of class, elite cultures and subordinate cultures should come to fore:

Much of the meaning derived from cinema has to do with the socially, culturally, and economically subordinate position of the urban poor, and issues of class, power, and dominance are central to understanding the relationship of viewers to the medium. (Dickey 1993: 7)

In order to investigate meaning-making in Tamil cinema as a process of negotiation, she approaches it from the perspective of the participants (filmmakers, critics, censors and viewers), the activities (filmmaking, criticism, censorship, political activities, filmgoing, filmwatching and fan clubs) and the texts of cinema (elements, story, characters, themes, social relationships among characters, element of fantasy).

Dickey has found that the contradiction between utopian image and reality and the conflict between Tamil viewers' identification with and distancing from the lower class is central to the pleasure of Tamil cinema:

Cinema suggests that life is fine now, in no need of change since the poor already possesses the best aspects of life (i.e. morality and strength of character), and simultaneously that present difficulties will soon resolve without effort and be replaced by abundance (i.e. material wealth). (Dickey 1993: 176).

She concludes that viewers are not passive recipients of a medium but actively participate in the construction of the utopian images of themselves.

A cursory look at the anthropological approach to a feature film demonstrates that there has been little academic debate about the relevance of a feature film within the field of anthropology. The few existing works on feature films mentioned above are mainly confined to the content analysis of a film as a cultural text. By concentrating on the text, the researchers attempted to relate a feature film (or films) and national culture or cultural identity in its totality. Their main interests were to treat a feature film as a "cultural document" or cultural data in order to investigate cultural themes, symbols, and behavior in a given culture. However, those approaches failed to deal with film as an active agent as

well as a communicative process in Sol Worth's sense by emphasizing the limited aspect of a feature film as a product of culture.

Hortense Powdermaker's now outdated study on Hollywood may be a good example of an investigation into the filmmaking community as if it constituted a distinctive society, with its own organizational structure, hierarchies, goals and conflicts. Sara Dickey's class-based research on Tamil films, in which she focuses on meaning-making in Tamil cinema as a process of negotiation from the perspective of the participants, the activities and the films as texts, also exemplifies an anthropological attempt to relate feature films and economic, sociocultural and political factors.

My study, however, will be more concerned with an analysis of the actual process of cultural creation of a film and reception of it by focusing on the communicative process of a film, rather than by providing a general picture of cinematic activities as demonstrated in Powdermaker's and Dickey's studies.

Next, I will briefly explore two case studies of the cultural production of TV programs (TV documentary and TV soap opera) from an anthropological perspective. I will

use them as a framework for my research on the production process of *Chimhyang*.

### **TV as Cultural Production**

For the research on the production side of a feature film, Michael Intintoli's work on TV soap opera and Barry Dornfeld's study on Public TV Documentary Series need to be mentioned. These two studies on TV as cultural production do not mention feature film production directly, but they give insights on the study of feature filmmaking as cultural production and provide a framework for the analysis of its production activity.

Michael Intintoli, in his *Taking Soap Opera Seriously: The World of "Guiding Light"* (1984) argues against studying the symbolic form of a TV program as a finished work or conducting a textual analysis of its form and content. Instead, he asserts that the connections between society and symbolic forms can be best explained through an empirical study of the production in context.

Drawing on Sol Worth's communication model, he approaches the soap opera as "part of a communicative process that is both socially structured and culturally patterned" (Intintoli 1984: 8):

Research that does not take into account social and cultural processes, that deals solely with "communication," is necessarily limited and misleading . . . Given these insights, I have focused on the actual production process and described and analyzed the way the performances are shaped by the production process. (Intintoli 1984: 13)

The premise of his study is that "reality is a social construction that partakes of both social conditions and patterns of meaning or symbolic codes" (Intintoli 1984: 14). He opposes the traditional distinctions between producer-product-audience and suggests that their relationships be explained in a more holistic and communicative way based on the cultural and social experience of the participants, whether they are producers, performers or audience members. Intintoli attempts to relate the performance and practices of soap opera production to the larger society by demonstrating the organizational relationships between creative program makers (performers, head writers, directors and producers), market competition with other soap operas for audiences, the hierarchical and collective activity of the work involving a division of labor and the use of complex technologies, the aesthetic conventions (visual, audio, musical conventions), and the interaction with the audience using audience members' letters and ratings.

Barry Dornfeld's *Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture* (1998), which contains ethnographic research on a public television documentary series entitled *Childhood*, investigates how a public television documentary is produced as American public culture and demonstrates the value of conducting ethnographies of media as forms of cultural production. Dornfeld points out that the so-called "production of culture" perspective of the study of communicative forms<sup>i</sup> helps in investigating the conditioning influence of organizational forces (institutional, occupational, and historical) and work interactions in the production process. However, it has been limited by its theoretical grounding in industrial sociology and a lack of regard for symbolic import of the "cultural products." Based on Sol Worth's visual communication model and Bourdieu's approach to cultural production, Dornfeld instead incorporates an "interpretive or symbolic perspective" and a "practice-oriented approach" to media production research. In the study, he explores organizational forces of the work and producers' interpretations and evaluations, and he conducts a textual analysis in order to better understand the TV program as a form of cultural production:

My analysis of this form of public culture begins with an understanding of how social agents (producers, viewers) conceive of (interpret, evaluate) these textual forms and the meanings they encode in and interpret from the texts they produce and consume. At the same time, I look at the actual processes of work, leisure, and forms of socialization in which agents engage, and how practice is shaped by and in turn shapes larger social structures. (Dornfeld 1998: 12)

Dornfeld opposes the habitual divide between production and consumption by saying that "the very separation made between audience members and producers is an artifact of the history of mass communications scholarship tied to an industrial model of communications research" (Dornfeld 1998: 14). He instead argues that producers of documentary television, while engaged in a complex, multifaceted process of evaluation, interpretation and anticipation in their work, are also audience members in a more conventional sense "in which producers seek and, in seeking, construct their audiences . . ." (Dornfeld 1998: 12). In short, according to Dornfeld, producers should be considered as both authors and audiences:

In a counterreversal of the characterization of "the viewer as producer," we can see *television producers as viewers*, and more generally, *cultural producers as consumers* in the broad sense: as interpreting, active agents, who decode "texts" . . . within their own complex of tastes, preferences and practices. (italic original) (Dornfeld 1998: 16)

Intintoli and Dornfeld's approaches to the production side of mass media mark a step in the right direction, because they have integrated cultural and interpretive concerns into the previous production studies which mainly focused on the conditioning influence of organizational forces and work interactions in the production process. My study can be located within a part of a tradition of production studies that examine how communicative media is created, articulated and constructed and will explore the observation of the work process itself, the interpretations of key filmmakers (the director, screen writer and cinematographer) and the texts to see them as constructive acts of social communication and cultural production.

On the other hand, although Dornfeld and Intintoli assert that an ethnographic approach to cultural production bridges the separation between production and consumption, and between producers' intentional meanings and audience members' interpreted meanings, their studies rely on producers' construction and projection of their audiences and therefore fail to examine how real viewers interpret meanings in the empirical sense.

Before explicating the frameworks for an ethnographic understanding of the social world of actual audience and reception practices, as demonstrated later in this chapter,

it is necessary to briefly review the historical reception studies of a feature film in order to understand the distinct limitation of reading films as texts, or a textual analysis, and provide an alternative approach to the text-based study of a film.

### **Beyond Textual Determinism: Film and Historical Reception Studies**

The history of film and of the ways in which audiences have been studied has been written mainly from the perspective of "textual analysis," or the "canonical method of literary studies" (Stacey 1993: 260). In relation to this issue, Robert Allen argues that "film history had been written as if films had no audiences or were seen by everyone and in the same way, or as if however they were viewed and by whomever, the history of "films" was distinct from and privileged over the history of their being taken up by the billions of people who have watched them since 1894" (Allen 1990: 348). Jackie Stacey also comments on "textual obsession" (Stacey 1993) in the reception study and practical reasons for the film theorists' reluctance to explore the area of audience research as follows:

Theoretical anxieties concerning 'crude empiricism' apart, there are material issues which have prevented researchers from investigating cinema audiences.

The ease of conducting textual analysis certainly compares favorably with the uncertainties and practical problems of audience research: almost invariably, the former is more straightforward, less time-consuming and more manageable. The film text is a discrete object of study which is usually relatively accessible, in contrast to audiences who have to be selected, contacted, and whose opinions and feelings have to be collected before any analysis can even begin. (Stacey 1993: 263)

Against this "textual determinism" Janet Staiger argues that "what we are interested in, then, is not the so-called correct reading of a particular film but the range of possible readings and reading processes at historical moments and their relation or lack of relation to groups of historical spectators" (Staiger 1986: 20).

In *Interpreting Film*, she differentiates her approach from that of textual analysis and suggests that the goal of reception analysis is to research "the history of the interactions between real readers and texts, actual spectators and films" (Staiger 1992: 8). "Another way of putting it" Staiger asserts, is that reception study "tries to explain an event (the interpretation of a film), while textual study is working toward elucidating an object (the film)" (Staiger 1992: 9).

However, she based her reception research on film reviews and critiques in popular newspapers, magazines and academic journals, and did not explore the understandings

of the actual "everyday" audience. In this respect, she comments that her study "has not dealt directly with non-tutored readings; it has unfortunately in many cases focused solely on popular press reviews" (Staiger 1992: 211). Staiger goes on to note that "only directly has this study asserted cinema about people" who may or may not even read those reviews and in all likelihood do not have the professional critical training that reviewers do. Staiger also asserts that "such an unspoken mass deserves as much attention as does the popular press-if not more" (Staiger 1992: 211).

As Staiger emphasized, the investigation of the historical spectator presents the film researcher with a whole series of complex methodological and theoretical questions about the status of audiences' accounts of films, how such accounts are to be found, and which interpretive frameworks might be useful in analyzing them.

Staiger's study focuses on the reception of several specific films, including Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. In her research on *The Birth of a Nation* (Staiger 1992: 139-153), she mentions that "the continuing history of the reception of *The Birth of a Nation* can be considered as a nodal point for analyzing conditions of reception as they relate to evaluating subject matter and narrational

techniques, positing effects of movies, and ultimately, revealing racial attitudes and political positions of a film's opponents and defenders" (Staiger 1992: 139). In order to demonstrate her arguments, she compares the initial 1915 reception of *The Birth of a Nation* with a transformation of the reception of *The Birth of a Nation* in the 1930s. She argues that the 1915 reception of the film was "organized around interpretations related to the question of racism" and in the reception of *The Birth of a Nation* in the 1930s, with the continuum of the racial issues, the second continuum of reactions were "associated with the contemporary political crisis of the European war for leftist radicals" (Staiger 1992: 139). Therefore, she concludes, "consequently, the race issue per se is reconfigured, intersecting with debates over the political economy and arguments about evaluating films and other cultural products of that political economy (Staiger 1992: 139-140).

Richard deCordova, in his research on studies on the cinema and children in the 1920s and 1930s in the US, argues that "an investigation of the practices through which researchers attempted to understand the child audience" in the 1920s and 1930s could "tell us something

about audience research today and the various power relations that subtend it" (deCordova 1993: 92).

He criticizes traditional mass-culture research in the US, including most of the work on children and movies produced during the 1920s and 1930s, as "paternalistic." This is in contrast to ethnographic work in recent cultural studies which, he understands, "has arisen largely as a way of countering or complicating theories of spectatorship put forward in much of 1970s film theory" and "has held a particular promise for contemporary researchers as a way of challenging [this] abstract and deterministic view with the concrete evidence of the ways audiences make sense of texts" (deCordova 1993: 92).

deCordova asserts that audience research during that period existed in connection with broader social and political imperatives and that the construction of the child audience in research was linked to the researchers' and reformers' efforts to produce and place the "real" child audience through the regulation of production, distribution and exhibition.

He argues that the image of childhood at that time was a historical construction, and he highlights that

the image of the child at the movies has functioned as a precondition of audience research generally. If mass-culture research has historically been

paternalistic, it is because it has been modeled on that image, an image that remains largely unexamined. An understanding of such attempts to constitute and control the child audience during the teens and twenties might give us a keener sense of the stakes of audience research today. (deCordova 1993: 103)

deCordova's research shows the historical context of how people of the time conceived of the cinema as a threat to definitions of childhood and were interested in "maintaining a traditional system of differences between child and adult" (deCordova 1993: 96). He asserts that "the problem of understanding and controlling the child was obviously not confined to the cinema" and "the construction of children extends well beyond the bounds of audience research to the broader social and cultural processes through which notions of childhood are constituted and maintained" (deCordova 1993: 94). deCordova focuses his research especially on the Hays Office and the children's Saturday Matinee movements of the time and shows that paternalistic audience research at that time was interconnected with the image of the child at the movies and attempted to constitute and control the child audience during the teens and twenties.

Around this perceived crisis, a veritable industry arose to "place" the child both symbolically and physically at the movies, to give children a particular way of looking at films that satisfied adult conceptions of childhood innocence. This

attempt at placement took several forms . . . What I would like to focus on here is a specific set of initiatives that attempted to "place" the child at the movies-the children's matinee movements of the 1910s and 1920s, and particularly the Hays Office efforts of 1925. (deCordova 1993: 96)

deCordova concludes that "what matter who is viewing" should be asked "not as a way of denying the real experience of spectators but as a way of calling into question the conditions under which concepts of audience have entered into public discourse" (deCordova 1993: 104).

Stacey and deCordova's research on the historical reception of a film cannot be applied directly to my research because they mainly focus on the historical spectatorship of a film. However, their opposition to textual determinism and emphasis on the importance of historicity and cultural specificity in the study of the reception of a film will provide useful insights for the reception study of a film in relation to actual viewers since a reception study of a film is an implicit critique of the text-based approach to a film. In particular, deCordova's criticism of the text-oriented study of traditional mass media research in the US in favor of ethnographic work in cultural studies is a step in the right direction because it recognizes the actual audience as the principal locus of meaning.

Considering that there have been few attempts to relate the film and actual audiences in the study of a feature film, it will help to explicate Stuart Hall's model of "Encoding-Decoding," David Morley's application of the model, and Stanley Fish's "interpretive community" and its applied studies in various genres (TV program, TV soap opera and romance). They provide a theoretical framework for the reception study of *Chimhyang* in my research.

#### **'Encoding-Decoding' Model: Stuart Hall and David Morley**

Stuart Hall's influential work on "encoding and decoding" demonstrates how a cultural text can produce different viewer reactions and meanings in a particular cultural context. Hall (1980) argues that meanings of a particular text do not reside in texts themselves, but rather they are produced in the negotiation between the particular viewer and texts in specific contexts. Drawing on the work of sociologist Franklin Parkin (1971), the model suggests that there are three hypothetical positions from which the construction of decodings of a television discourse occurs: dominant (or preferred), negotiated and oppositional. The first decoding position, which Hall calls "the dominant-hegemonic position" and which is now more widely called the "preferred reading," occurs "[w]hen

the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, say, a television newscast or current affairs programme full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say that the viewer *is operating inside the dominant code*" (italic original) (Hall 1980: 136). A dominant or preferred reading receives the message of the cultural text without question and decodes the content in harmony with what the producer of the text, for instance, the film-maker, intended or encoded.

The second position is "the negotiated code or position." In this decoding position, the reader or the viewer recognizes the dominant ideology implicit in the text's properties but does not accept all of the content of the text for an alternative:

Decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract) while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules-it operates with exceptions to the rule. It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated applicable to 'local conditions', to its own more corporate positions. This negotiated version of the dominant ideology is thus shot through with contradictions, though these are only on certain occasions brought to full visibility. (Hall 1980: 137)

The final receptional position is called "the oppositional code." According to Hall, this "oppositional" reading occurs when a viewer perfectly understands "both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary way" (Hall 1980: 137-138) and chooses to decode "within some alternative frame of reference" (Hall 1980: 137).

First and foremost, Hall's encoding-decoding model gains importance in that it highlights the significance of the viewer's socio-cultural background for the construction of the meanings of a text. Secondly, although she acknowledges that her own hypothetical decoding position "needs to be empirically tested and refined" (Hall 1980: 136), Hall's model provides media researchers with a practicable and testable framework for conducting a cultural analysis in an empirical world.

Hall's encoding-decoding model was tested empirically by David Morley in a study of the British magazine program *Nationwide* (1980). Morley used Hall's theory to demonstrate how individual interpretations of television texts vary with the structural and cultural formations preexistent to the individual such as class, occupation, subculture, gender, and ethnicity of the various viewer groups. Morley argues for Hall's model and emphasizes that

The point of the preferred reading model was to insist that readers are, of course, engaged in productive work, but under determinate conditions. Those determinate conditions are of course supplied both by the text, the producing institution and the by the social history of the audience. (Morley 1989: 18-19)

He strongly opposed the psychologistic model of reception and the notion of the textual spectator, which was a theoretical tool in the journal *Screen* at that time:

In this discourse, primarily developed in the journal *Screen*, film and television spectatorship is almost exclusively theorized from the perspective of the "productivity of text." As a consequence, the role of the viewer was conceived in purely formalist terms: as a position inscribed in the text. Here, the subject-in-the-text tends to collapse with "real" social subjects. In this model, there is no space for a dialogical relationship between texts and social subjects. Texts are assumed to be the only source of meaning . . . (Seiter 1989: 98)

Morley instead formulated a more dynamic model of the interactions among media texts and empirical audience members' varied social, cultural, and economic positions, as well as the discourses and codes available to them.

He showed two episodes of the BBC's magazine/news program *Nationwide* to twenty-nine different groups of viewers "to discover how interpretations were collectively constructed through talk and the interchange between respondents in the groups situation" (Morley 1980: 33). Each group consisted of five to ten people. Occupations included shop stewards, trade union organizers, university

arts students, teacher training students, photography students, bank managers, schoolboys, print managers and apprentices. The racial composition ranged from totally white groups to mixed-race groups to totally black groups. Morley also took each group's political orientation, class, gender and ethnicity into consideration. As a rule, many of the results seemed to support Hall's model.

For example, a group of teacher training students, university arts students and photography students produced similar readings which ranged between "dominant" and "negotiated," while the group of shop stewards produced an "oppositional reading." However, some results did not conform to Hall's model. For example, the group of working-class apprentices, school boys and middle-class bank managers showed what Morley categorizes as dominant readings, which indicated that there could be no simple correlation between class and reading position. Morley concludes that the readings in no way directly correlated social class position and he argues for a formulation that links class and other "discourse positions" (bodies of ideas and shared socio-cultural practices):

it is always a question of how social position plus particular discourse positions produce specific readings; readings which are structured because the structure of access to different discourses is determined by social position'. (Morley 1980: 134)

Morley demonstrates that differential readings are not determined directly by social or class position, and he reformulates that other determinants (other discourses) are always in play. However, he "still stresses the importance of class in that it determines access (or the nature of access) to different discourses" (Storey 1996: 17).

Despite other arguments by critics and himself in a subsequent book, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (1992), Morley's *The Nationwide Audience*, is "a testament not so much to the success of its project (testing out the Hall's encoding/decoding model) as to its categoric demonstration of the complex polysemy of the television text and the importance of *extratextual* (italic original) determinants of textual meaning" (Graeme Turner 1990: 122). Morley's summary of his own work and suggestions for future study address a relevant point for the cultural research of reception:

I have been able to do no more than to indicate some of the ways in which social position and (sub) cultural frameworks may be related to individual readings . . . I would claim only to have shown the viability of an approach which treats the audience as a set of cultural groupings rather than as a mass of individuals or as a set of rigid socio-demographic categories. Clearly, more work needs to be done on the relation between group and individual readings. (Morley 1980: 163)

While Hall's model and Morley's empirical investigation are valuable, there is still room for a few considerations. Firstly, due to the nature of British Cultural Studies' heavy reliance on ideology and class, their works have paid less attention to other equally important categories such as cultural values, beliefs, ethnic aspects and other cultural perspectives. Secondly, as Graeme Turner (1990) indicates, Morley's research relies on too many specific actors (class, occupation, locality, ethnicity, family structure, educational background, access to varied forms of mass communication and so on), which are so interrelated that it becomes futile to attempt empirical analyses.

Hall's model, however, can serve for the anthropological investigation of reception if cultural perspectives are appropriately added and empirically applied in the proper way.

Jacqueline Bobo's "*The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers*" (1988) is a useful example. She uses Hall's "encoding and decoding" model to examine the way in which Black women create oppositional meanings as audience members and cultural consumers of Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple*. She maintains that Hall's notion of

oppositional reading is useful in discovering that "when a person comes to view a film, she/he does not leave her/his histories, whether social, cultural, economic, racial, or sexual at the door" and "an audience member from a marginalized group (people of color, women, the poor, and so on) has an oppositional stance as they participate in mainstream media" (Bobo 1988: 96). Bobo maintains that

(From this wary viewing standpoint), a subversive reading of a text can occur. This alternative reading comes from something in the work that strikes the viewer as amiss, that appears 'strange'. Behind the idea of subversion lies a reader-oriented notion of "making strange." When things appear strange to the viewer, she/he may then bring other viewpoints to bear on the watching of the film and may see things other than what the film-makers intended. The viewer, that is, will read 'against the grain' of the film. (Bobo 1988: 13)

Drawing on John Fiske's explanation of "the subject" in cultural analysis and David Morley's concept of "interdiscourses," or the encounter of the text and the subject, Bobo further argues that there can be two aspects to a cultural competency, which are the repertoire of discursive strategies and the range of knowledge that a marginalized viewer brings to the act of watching and interpreting a film:

One is a positive response where the viewer constructs something useful from the work by negotiating her/his response, and/or gives a subversive reading to the work. The other is a

negative response in which the viewer rejects the work. (Bobo 1988: 13)

According to Bobo, Black women as cultural consumers brought the "store of negative images that have come from prior mainstream media experience" to their oppositional readings of *The Color Purple* (Bobo 1988: 103).

In Chapter 5, I will utilize the concept of "oppositional reading" to demonstrate how a film created by older filmmakers can evoke different viewer reactions from younger university audiences, and how students interpret a film in terms of their own background, experience and cultural milieu. In order to illuminate the generational difference between the older key filmmakers and the younger audience, I will focus on values and beliefs, whereas Stuart Hall and David Morley put emphasis on class issues.

**'Interpretive Community': Stanley Fish, Tamar Liebes & Elihu Katz, Dorothy Hobson and Janice Radway**

In the 1980s, while Hall and Morley initiated cultural studies audience research in Britain,<sup>ii</sup> Stanley Fish, in the USA, proposed the concept of "interpretive communities" for the study of reception.

Fish argues against the existence of "pure texts" which exist as an objective, determinate given in an unmediated fashion and claims that the meaning of any

reader/text transaction is determined by a matrix of interpretive strategies, cultural traditions and conventions shared by particular "interpretive communities":

Indeed, it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features. (Fish 1980: 14)

According to him, interpretive strategies preexist the act of reading and therefore determine the position of reading since an individual's thought and mental operations have a source in interpretive community:

. . . members of the same community will necessarily agree because they will see (and by seeing, make) everything in relation to that community's assumed purposes and goals; and conversely, members of different communities will disagree because from each of their respective oppositions the other "simply" cannot see what is obviously and inescapably there: This, then, is the explanation for the stability of interpretation among different readers (they belong to the same community). (Fish 1980: 15)

He argues that the problem of balancing the text and the reader as well as objectivity and subjectivity is dissolved because the text and the reader are interdependent in producing meanings of the text:

An interpretive community is not objective because as a bundle of interests, of particular purposes and goals, its perspective is interested rather than neutral; but by the very same reasoning, the meanings and texts produced by an interpretive community are not subjective because they do not proceed from an

isolated individual but from a public and conventional point of view. (Fish 1980: 14)

The notion of "interpretive communities" contributes to illuminate the significance of culture in the construction of meaning and serve as the bridge between cultural approaches to the media audience. It also helps confine the audience, which is an "unstructured group" (Nightingale 1996) and "unstructured communities" (Allen and Gomery 1985) in an empirical sense, for the reception study in located situations.

Fish's theory has been tested by a few scholars who have taken up the notion of "interpretive communities" and experimented with reception studies on TV drama, soap opera and romance. Drawing on Fish's "interpretive community," Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1988) conducted reception research on the retelling of the television fiction *Dallas* and tried to find out how different ethnic groups told the story about the program in different ways. Focus groups which included Arabs, Moroccan Jews, Russian immigrants to Israel, second-generation Kibbutzniks, and second-generation Americans living in suburban Los Angeles were asked to retell the story of the program which they had just seen, and to imagine that they were explaining it to a friend or person who had not seen it. In basing their

research on the assumption that different ethnicities as subcultures will be projected in the readings of *Dallas*, Liebes and Katz aim to illuminate

(1) whether there is a correlation between real viewers' cultural backgrounds and their choice of forms for retelling, (2) how closely real viewers' forms of retelling correspond to our own textual analysis, and (3) what can be inferred from the choice of form about the chooser's perception of the relationship of the program to real life. (Liebes and Katz 1988: 72)

According to their research findings, Arabs and Moroccan Jews offer a "linear" retelling in which "the reality of the story is unquestioned and its message presumably unchallenged" (Liebes and Katz 1988: 77). Arabs and Moroccans "select the action-oriented subplot . . . tell the story in closed form . . ." and "the characters they describe are rigidly stereotyped" (Liebes and Katz 1988: 80). In short, they retell the story in sociological perspective. The second group, Americans and Kibbutzniks select the "segmented" retelling which "focuses on the characters, their motivations, and their interrelations" (Liebes and Katz 1988: 71). In their retelling, they are not "concerned with the linearity of the narrative but with analyzing the problems of characters intrapersonally and interpersonally" (Liebes and Katz 1988: 81). Their retelling explains the story in psychological terms.

Finally, the Russian Jews retell the story in a "thematic" manner which emphasizes the "relationship between the message, the motives of the encoders, and themselves as audience" (Liebes and Katz 1988: 76). They "perceive the story as being a false picture of reality . . . (and) . . . are also aware that their illustrations from the story are chosen, self-consciously, to highlight the potential persuasive power of the program" (Liebes and Katz 1988: 81). Their retelling invokes an ideological perspective.

Liebes and Katz concluded that differences (linear, segmented and thematic) in the retelling of the television fiction *Dallas* result from the distinctive meaning systems and narrative forms of the ethnic groups as interpretive communities.

Dorothy Hobson's study of soap opera viewers, *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera* (1982), also emphasizes the importance of a gender-based "interpretive community" in the construction of the meaning of popular soap operas. For Hobson, women constitute an "interpretive community" sharing a "sense of common interests," and thus the active participation of the female audience as an "interpretive community" is the central issue in *Crossroads*. In her study, Hobson challenges the myth of the passive female viewer and textual determinism, and

emphasizes the active female audience based on the idea that

communication is by no means a one-way process and the contribution which the audience makes to *Crossroads* is as important as the messages which the programme-makers put into the programme. (Hobson 1982: 170)

She examines the process of the production of popular TV soap opera and the viewers' reception and understanding of the programs to illuminate how women watch a particular popular genre such as soap opera in different ways. Hobson watched the programs with viewers in their own homes and interviewed them in an unstructured way while watching episodes as well as after the programs had finished. She hoped to find out the relationship between the female audience and the text, the reasons for viewing and women's performances as members of the television audience.

Hobson argues that women's reading of the program tends to be different from that of production teams in terms of the themes of the program and its meaning because family structure and everyday routines in the domestic environment affect women's viewing of the program:

Family situations change both the ability to view with any form of concentration and also the perspective which the audience have on a programme. (Hobson 1982: 111)

Hobson also notes that the working-class women audience as an interpretive community was mostly concerned with family matters:

Working with ideas of the family and family life as the norm to which it is desirable to strive, the representation of family life in *Crossroads* is one of the main features to which the audience responds. (Hobson 1982: 142)

In conclusion, Hobson emphasizes that the reading of a television program depends upon women's life experiences as mostly working-class women and their cultural knowledge, their knowledge of the program and its genre, which pre-exists the text outside the viewing situation:

*Crossroads* viewers contribute to their own understanding of the programme and make their own readings of what the production sets out to communicate. They work with the text and *add their own experiences* and opinions to the stories in the programme . . . It seems that the myth of the passive viewer is about to be shattered . . . It seems that they expect to contribute to the production which they are watching and *bring their own knowledge* to augment the text. (emphasis added) (Hobson 1982: 135-136)

Another example of how Fish's concept can be applied to reception research is Radway's empirical work on the forty-two avid women readers of romances in *Reading Romance* (1984). Radway uses Fish's model of "interpretive communities" to explicate women's pleasure in the reading of romances within the broader social meanings of the genre:

Since I was assuming from the start with reader theorist Stanley Fish that textual interpretations are constructed by interpretive communities using specific interpretive strategies, I sought to contrast the then-current interpretation of romances produced by trained literary critics with that produced by fans of the genre. (Radway 1984: 7)

Based on Fish's theory, Radway aims to theorize patterns and regularities the Smithton women bring to their reading of romances which are in some way different from those of the community of trained literary scholars. She argues that:

Whatever the theoretical possibility of an infinite number of readings, in fact, there are patterns or regularities to what viewers and readers bring to texts in large part because they acquire specific cultural competencies as a consequence of their particular social location. Similar readings are produced, I argue, because similarly located readers learn a similar set of reading strategies and interpretive codes that they bring to bear upon the texts they encounter. (Radway 1984: 8)

In her analysis of women's letters, Radway makes an analytical distinction between the significance of the event of reading and the meaning of the text. Radway's findings indicate that there is an important contradiction in the pleasures of romance reading for women, depending on whether or not the narrative fantasies of the texts themselves or the act of reading as a cultural practice within the social context of a particular group of women is taken into consideration:

the act of romance reading is oppositional because it allows the women to refuse momentarily their self-abnegating social role . . . [but] the romance's narrative structure embodies a simple recapitulation and recommendation of patriarchy and its constituent social practices and ideologies. (Radway 1984: 210)

Radway's study shows that the textual content of the romance novel contains a patriarchal ideology, but by using the act of reading women readers assert resistance to their social situation in the routines of their daily lives as wives and mothers, and they make an "intentional projection of a utopian future" (Radway 1984: 12):

Romance reading . . . might be seen therefore as a collectively elaborated female ritual through which women explore the consequences of their common social condition as the appendages of men and attempt to imagine a more perfect state where all the needs they so intensely feel and accept as given would be adequately addressed. (Radway 1984: 212)

Any research on the reception of cultural media, including feature film, necessarily meets the problem of situating the subjects on a manageable level because the actual audience, as Allen and Gomery (1985) argue, is an "unstructured" group. In this vein, Stanley Fish's idea of "interpretive community" and the other studies mentioned above have turned out to be useful in their application in my study.

The idea of "interpretive community," in general, is

useful in illuminating the relationship between the construction of meaning and the specific audience group in empirical research; however, my study draws more on Hobson's and Radway's studies than on that of Liebes and Katz because the former highlight the significance of the viewers' life experiences and cultural knowledge (Hobson), as well as specific interpretive strategies (Radway) in decoding a text, while the latter focus more on the form of retelling of the text.

Within the context of the classroom as an "interpretive community," my study will attempt to elicit students' reactions and the cultural attitudes shared by the university students as well as the viewing strategies specific to them on the assumption that students are constructing their cultural worlds in response to the film.

To summarize this chapter which serves as a theoretical overview of the study, the major issues are as follows. Firstly, a feature film is a cultural document or a cultural text and is a good tool for anthropological investigation. Secondly, feature filmmaking and industry should be treated as a form of cultural production and its production activity needs to be empirically studied in the productive context. Thirdly, the textual analysis of a feature film is limited and should yield to the study of

the reception of a film which recognizes the audience as the locus of meaning. Fourthly, Hall's model helps to understand the relationship between the film and actual viewers and the significance of the audiences' socio-cultural background for the construction of the meaning of a film. Finally, the notion of "interpretive communities" provides a framework for the analysis of the empirical reception of a film and contributes to highlight the significance of culture in the construction of the meanings of a film.

In later chapters, the study focuses on the activities of production personnel and on the process of making a film (Chapter 3), on the film itself as cultural text (Chapter 4) and on the reception of the film by the university students (Chapter 5). This provides a unique case study of the communication process of a film in the round by attempting to balance the "production," "text" and "reader" sides of the equation on the grounds that only a combined analysis of textual structures, production practices and audience reactions can form the basis of a more comprehensive understanding of mass media. Any exclusion of these components will provide only a limited approach to a mediated cultural form including a feature film.

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