Producing/Reproducing Ideology: Unearthing Multiple Perspectives on Literature and Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

Literature and Popular Culture, a course in the MA Postcolonial Literature in English exposes students to the manifestations of popular culture in literature. By examining various popular literary genres, the students are trained to see the significance of popular culture within everyday realities using rhetorical methods as well as critical theories. As part of their research paper, students are required to observe, reflect, describe and critically analyse several forms of popular culture and expected to understand how some literary works evolve from high culture to popular culture, thus becoming a significant force in the everyday lives of the masses. However, as the course involves a study of the types of popular culture mostly originating from the West, students find it difficult to identify the underlying patterns prevalent in the texts. In addition, although the students come from diverse non-Western ethnic backgrounds, their interpretations are one-dimensional, usually projecting the mainstream views. As ideology is a prevalent concept in popular culture, it is felt that an understanding of this concept will help them to develop multiple perspectives in their study of literature and popular culture. Therefore, this paper will focus on how understanding ideology can be an intervention method into unearthing multiple meanings in literature and popular culture.

Keywords: ideology; literary genres; popular culture; sitcom; action research

INTRODUCTION

Literature and Popular Culture is one of the courses offered to the students of the MA in Postcolonial Literatures in English Program at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, The National University of Malaysia. Students are exposed to various analytical methods and theories such as Marxism, Feminism and Postmodernism to see the manifestations of popular culture in literary works. Students are also trained to apply literary tools to examine popular 'texts' such as films and television series to uncover gaps, identify patterns and unveil meanings that make up our everyday realities. However, as the course involves a study of the types of popular culture mostly originating from the West, students find it difficult to identify the multiple meanings prevalent in the texts. Therefore, a reading approach or a way into the text was necessary to help students acquire the skills to become a critic of popular culture.

POPULAR CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY

Popular culture can be defined in many ways. Storey (2006) puts forth six definitions of the concept. Firstly, according to Storey, it is a culture well liked by many people. This is usually indicated by the quantitative index of a cultural 'product' or material, for example the sales of books, CDs or DVDs; the attendance at concerts, sporting events, festivals or the ratings of TV programmes. Secondly, popular culture can also be seen as "left over culture" or

"residual culture" in that the products fail to reach the standards and complexities of high culture (Storey 2006, p.4). An example of this would be popular music as opposed to classical music. The third definition of popular culture is that it is a 'mass culture'. According to this definition, formulaic and manipulative cultural material is mass produced for the consumption of "non-discriminating consumers" (Storey 2006, p.6). The fourth definition that Storey proposes is that it is the authentic culture of the people and not something imposed by the authority. The fifth definition of popular culture is based on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. According to this definition, popular culture is "a site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups" (Storey 2006, p. 8). Popular culture then becomes a process of articulation/disarticulation that may denote conflicts of gender, race, class, generation, sexuality and more. The final definition draws on postmodern thinking that claims popular culture is a culture that no longer recognises the difference between high and low culture. This postmodernist thinking, according to Storey, signals an end to elitism simultaneously indicating the final victory of commerce over culture. The six definitions of popular culture are not mutually exclusive. They show that popular culture is intertwined in a complex relationship with communities, history and ideology.

According to Macherey (cited in Storey 2006, p. 60), all narratives consist of an "ideological project". He further divides a narrative into three possible instances: the ideological project, the realisation and the unconscious of the text. The ideological project refers to the truth that the text sets out to show; the realisation refers to the truth that the text reveals; and the unconscious of the text refers to truth that is repressed. It is based on this premise that the students were introduced to the 'ideological analysis' as a way of approaching texts in popular culture in order to produce astute and insightful cultural critiques.

Ideology as a social practice consists of "discourse" and "activities", two different yet dialectic components (Franco and Chand 1989, p. 2600). Discourse, according to Franco and Chand refers to aspects such as "language, ideas, propositions, theories, symbols, etc" whereas activities pertain to "specific actions, gestures, behaviour patterns, and institutions as specimens of reified activity" (p. 2601). On the dialectic nature of discourse and activities, Eagleton states, "[h]owever abstrusely metaphysical the ideas in question may be, they must be translatable by the ideological discourse into a 'practical' state, capable of furnishing their adherents with goals, motivations, prescriptions, imperatives and so on" (1991, p. 47). In this research, ideology as social practice is examined to see how subjects occupy and negotiate their realities as depicted in the popular culture texts. This is important towards an understanding of popular culture, within which the subjects are interpellated and shaped by the inherent ideologies, as beneficiaries and players of the various social practices.

The dual role of ideology, determining and being determined, as argued by Althusser (1984) will also reveal the workings of interpellation and agency on identity formation in the context of popular culture. What it means when a subject is interpellated is that the individual behaves in accordance with what he freely adopts from the ideological apparatus in terms of practical attitude and regular practices. In this situation, the subject therefore can negotiate his identity and has agency to 'freely' choose any discourse or apparatus available to him. Additionally, in relation to identity or the formation of the self, Foucault states that the traditional philosophical questions of "What is the world? What is man? What is truth? What is knowledge? How can we know something? And so on…" (1988, p. 145) should be complemented with the questions "What are we in our actuality" and "What are we today". To exemplify Foucault's concern with technology of self in a more concrete context, De Laurentis (1987) states that gender as both "representation and as self-representation, is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses,

epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life" (p. 2). Therefore, in relation to ideology and popular culture, popular culture texts such as films and sitcoms become sites where researchers can examine how characters that represent our actualities and practices of daily life negotiate and project their identity. This will, in turn, reveal the ideological underpinnings of a particular popular culture text or genre and the society from which the text emerges as Noraini (2009) states, "Many disciplines, including philosophy, linguistics, ethnography and anthropology, examine representation as a way of disclosing the embedded, underlying meanings of texts… Hence, what matters are three central issues: who performs the representation; what the representation means; and what effects the representations have" (p.126-127).

In the field of cultural studies, ideology has many competing definitions (Storey 1998). However, in the early 1980s, a definition of ideology formulated by Hall became the principal working definition. According to Hall:

> By ideology I mean the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works (cited in Storey 1998: xii).

Consequently, to explain the process of ideological struggle, Hall utilised the duality of the notion of "articulation" – which means both "to express" and "to join together" (xii). He argues that cultural texts do not have prescribed meanings as meaning is "always the result of articulation" (xii). Hall further explains that the process of ideological struggle is called articulation "because meaning has to be expressed, but it is always expressed in a specific context, a specific historical moment, within a specific discourse(s). Thus expression is always connected (articulated) to and conditioned by context" (cited in Storey 1998: xii).

Within the framework discussed above, this paper discusses "ideological analysis" as the intervention measure applied in class to enable students to become critical readers of popular culture texts, who are able to position themselves as producers of meaning within a particular social context. This is part of an on-going action research that aims to train students to be aware of

1. connections between works of literature and popular culture and the society from which they emerge, and analyse those interactions from multiple perspectives.
2. how identities of diverse individuals and communities are developed and portrayed and how representations of self and others occur in works of literature and popular culture.

THE APPROACH TO THE TEXTS

The popular culture genres covered in the duration of the semester were romance, science fiction, situational comedies, manga as well as a canonical texts that has entered the popular culture realm. For the purpose of discussion, I will first refer to the session on *Friends*, a series selected for the situational comedy genre, and will then progress to the students' projects to show how they went on to produce ideological readings of other popular texts. The *Friends* series made its debut on American television in 1994 and achieved popular culture status almost instantly. The series maintained high ratings throughout its ten seasons and marked a change in American culture. As Sandell (1998) remarks:

> The show has spawned a cottage industry of texts, which surround the show: countless articles in the popular media and press, fan books, clothing, and a vast number of Internet newsgroups, homepages, and web-sites devoted to the show, the actors, and the fans. One of the characters' haircuts became a popular fad

> ("the Rachel"), and all of the actors regularly grace the covers of various popular teenage and adult magazines. *Friends* is not only popular in the United States but also is shown around the world (as is evidenced by the nationalities of participants in Internet discussions)… (p.142).

Friends revolves around the lives of a group of six single, twenty something adults living in New York city. The portrayal of the white and middle class characters are also said to champion mainstream heterosexual normalcy (Sandell 1998). When asked what they know of the series, my students responded that it is a celebration of friendship and freedom. A quick survey of entertainment websites dedicated to *Friends* reveals this to be the common perception. IMDb for example states that the sitcom is about "The lives, loves, and laughs of six young friends living in Manhattan" http://www.imdb.com/list/SRxxSZ3fwFI/. TBS Inc., a Time Warner company, describes *Friends* in its website as a series where "six Friends gather to talk about life and love" http://www.tbs.com/stories/story/0,,268,00.html. Due to the contemporaneity and universality of the themes in *Friends,* it was decided that an ideological reading of this text would reveal to the students the multiple perspectives present in an unseeming popular culture genre. In the same vein as the portrayal of the carefree characters, Howie (2009, p. 4) states, "I am tempted to argue that post-9/11 *Friends* sits well in this list of consumables as *New York without the terror* – a city without the insecurity". Howie's statement is based on the observation that the producers of *Friends* portrayed the characters as almost untouched by the events that shook not just New York but also the rest of the world. Therefore, to get the students to unveil the ideological project, the realisation and the unconscious of the text (as proposed by Macherey – discussed above) the students were asked to watch several episodes of *Friends* in their own time with a set of questions to help them produce an ideological analysis of the episodes. Based on five definitions of ideology proposed by Storey (2006), these questions were put forward to the students:

1. What systematic body of ideas or philosophy was articulated by the characters in *Friends* in relation to their social aspirations and daily activities?
2. What masking, concealment or distortions are present in relation to the characters' social relationships – e.g. family, work, society as well as romantic relationships?
3. What notions of inequality, exploitation, oppressions or conflicts are present in the worldview of the characters from *Friends*?
4. What is considered normal, natural and universal as opposed to abnormal, unnatural and parochial? E.g. binaries such as superior/inferior, mainstream/margin etc.
5. How do "rituals" and "customs" have the effect of binding people to a social order whilst excluding others? E.g. via inequalities of wealth, power, status.

For the benefit of the students, they were allowed to approach the questions based on their own areas of interest, for example gender issues, class struggle and so on. As the questions are wide-ranging in nature, their areas of interest would also lead them to a more focused and significant response.

According to Neufeld (2005), for students to become strategic readers, it is important for them to develop the skills to ask and answer questions of the text at hand. He explains that the asking and answering of questions can bring to life important thinking skills that will help to develop the students into critical readers. In addition, Wilson (2010) states that "questioning as thinking" or questioning to promote thinking skills involves, firstly, asking questions that trigger prior knowledge, connect texts and inform the teacher of the students' understanding. Secondly, it also requires responding to questions - while reading and post reading - through thinking about the source and content of the response as well as the strategies necessary to produce responses that are accurate and in a manner that is efficient.

Lastly, questioning as thinking also involves the sharing of views regarding the cognitive processes crucial to the asking and answering of questions. It is with the view that questions are useful tools in a teaching and learning context that my students were given the five questions to prompt a critical ideological reading of popular culture texts.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

As a consequence of the plan of action namely the leading questions, the students succeeded in producing an ideological analysis of *Friends*. During the post-viewing feedback session, they claim that *Friends* challenges the traditional notion of a family unit. This is in response to the fifth question: How do "rituals" and "customs" have the effect of binding people to a social order whilst excluding others? The students state that, in a particular episode, the six characters were portrayed celebrating Thanksgiving together, instead of with their respective families. In terms of rituals, what is usually a family occasion becomes a gathering that binds the friends together, while simultaneously excluding their parents who are deemed as different and "other" in terms of age and worldview. This example is also highlighted by Sandell (1998) who states that the friendship is portrayed as an alternative kinship network and renders the others as invisible.

Based on the fourth question - What is considered normal, natural and universal as opposed to abnormal, unnatural and parochial? E.g. binaries such as superior/inferior, mainstream/margin etc - the students also became aware that both the major and minor characters in the series are mainly white despite the fact that New York is a city well known to be a melting pot of different ethnicities and cultures. The students argued that this could be read as a means of excluding the ethnic others and projecting whiteness as normal and natural. The students also put forth the fact that the series neither support the notion of marriage (although a few of the characters do have children), nor keeping a steady job (only one of the characters is employed full-time) as the normal thing to do.

In addition, the students also managed to identify gender issues prevalent in the series. For example, based on the first question - What systematic body of ideas or philosophy was articulated by the characters in *Friends* in relation to their social aspirations and daily activities? – and the second question - What masking, concealment or distortions are present in relation to the characters' social relationships – e.g. family, work, society as well as romantic relationships? - they unearth the fact that *Friends,* in a covert way, also supports homosexuality as part of the American way of life. This is because, according to the students, homosexuality is often portrayed in the series. Though at times homosexuality is ridiculed and becomes a source of comic relief, it is projected as harmless thus reflecting the growing acceptance of homosexuality into the dominant culture. Nevertheless, issues relating to masculinity and femininity are also put forth in the series. One student identified masculinity/femininity as a source for the writers to create humour. In saying this, the student also said that the most common outcome of raising issues of masculinity/femininity is the fact that American society, as portrayed in the series, values physical beauty thus promoting the preoccupation with vanity. Therefore, at the end of the session, the students found that their careful analyses show *Friends* is more than just about how six friends go through life in a big city. They succeeded in challenging the claim that *Friends* was championing mainstream American lifestyle by uncovering the ideological project, the realisation and the unconscious of the text.

As a way forward, the students were then asked to address the same questions in order to produce an ideological reading of a popular text of their choice and most of the students chose Hollywood films. In one analysis, Student 1 identified elements of neo-colonialism in

the film *Iron Man 2* while Student 2 identified the same tendencies in the film *2012*. In the former, the student argued that *Iron Man 2* is an American display of power and knowledge. The technologies in weaponry portrayed in the film shows the American desire to take control of the world by showing the incredible intelligence of the Western man to defend the world while at the same time revealing the failure of other nations in handling a global threat. Whilst the student admitted that he enjoyed the film's use of special effects, by addressing the ideological questions, he managed to comprehend the unconscious of the film. In the latter analysis, Student 3 also identified a display of Western power and knowledge in the film *2012*. She revealed that despite the fact that it was an Indian scientist who first discovered the impending global catastrophe, it was the Americans who managed to save mankind from complete annihilation. As she states *"[t]his is a representation of India and Indians through Western eyes. As a country that was once colonised, India is incapable of handling such important knowledge and powerless to save humankind from the disaster. Consequently, United States is portrayed as powerful and civilized to handle the situation and this reveals how the West always sees themselves as superior compared to other nations".*

Student 4 analysed the box-office film *Titanic* and in his analysis highlights how the physical structure of the ship, Titanic, *"created an atmosphere that emphasizes the notion of class division. .....for the most part, the director portrays the rich as oppressive, rude and arrogant…This may not be a true depiction of the time, but it does capture and highlight the class distinction".* However, the student also states that the romance element of the film challenges the notion of class system as the two protagonists involved in the relationship come from different social backgrounds.

In another analysis of a sitcom, Student 5 unraveled the underlying meaning prevalent in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, a series that achieved popular culture status in Canada. The series brings together characters from diverse hybrid backgrounds – Lebanese-Canadian Muslim, Indian- Canadian Muslim, African-Canadian Muslim and so on – living together with a predominantly Christian population in a prairie town called Mercy. Each episode portrays the characters having to solve conflicts between them in a comedic manner. According to the student's analysis, the producers of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* situate two opposing views – the conservative and the liberal – in contrast in order to present conflicts in a humorous way. One particular conflict that the student highlighted from the series was when the Muslims in the community was faced with the dilemma of whether to let the Christians utilise their rented building, which is used as a mosque, to celebrate Christmas. At the end of the episode, the conflict was resolved with the Muslims actually celebrating Christmas together with the Christians. The idyllic ending that portrays peace and harmony successfully achieved portrays a collective dream world. Nevertheless, the student concluded that the series seek to challenge contemporary views about Islam by providing an alternative representation. By using comedy as a medium, the producers of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* also provided a counter-hegemonic perspective that seeks to educate the mainstream culture of the misrepresentations of Islam and its people in the media.

Based on the examples of student analyses above, it is evident that they were able to produce a critical and insightful ideological analysis of popular culture texts by addressing a few or all of the five questions given.

CONCLUSION

This paper discusses the action plan utilised in class to enable students to become critical readers of popular culture texts. By using leading questions, the students were able to understand the ideological projects of popular culture artifacts specifically by unearthing the unconscious of a particular popular text. The questions also helped the students to understand

the contexts from which the texts emerge. In addition, the questions also trained students to be resistant readers who are able to counter the hegemonic nature of popular culture.

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