

A Look at the History and Application of Critical Theory

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Abstract: Researchers who supported the idea of critical theory based their argument on the assumption that there is always a need for criticism in order to promote changes in society. The ultimate goal of critical theory, rather than predicting, explaining, or understanding social phenomenon, is to point out problems and pushing the decision of transformation. Critical theory assumed that the phenomenon is already existed and the inequality can only be addressed by reorganizing the society. This theory is inherently influenced by Marxism and the analytical ideas of Karl Marx. Although the researching process still involves the action of observing, analyzing, but the core idea of critical theory, as its name suggested, is to pursue changes through criticizing. There are six key concepts of this theory: text, meaning, culture, polysemy, hegemony, and ideology. It is because of its diversity that critical theory has very high applicability in the field of social studies and communication. This article aims to present an overview of the development history of critical theory and one of its outstanding applications – reader response theory.

Keywords: critical theory; reader response theory; Marxism; Karl Marx.

History of critical theory

The history of critical theory began with the presence of Frankfurt School during the 1930s and 1940s. The Frankfurt School, also known as the Institute of Social Research, is a specific school of thought that embraced the analytical ideas of Karl Marx. In its early day, Marxists of the Frankfurt School believed that the best way to understand how a society functioned was to look at who controlled the means of production that provided for the population's fundamental needs of food and shelter. A system of "industrial capitalism" was a prominent term noted by Marx, which referred to the belief that mass production created wealth for the wealthy—the ones who owned the factories where the goods were produced. This led to the core tension within society between the haves (the wealthy) and the have-nots (the workers who labored in factories). Social order was designed and maintained by the haves in a way that helped protect their dominance and serve their interests. One of the main ways

to keep that system stayed in place was to exploit the working class in order to create more wealth. This kind of society was strongly criticized by Karl Marx as he pointed out the possibility of a better life for all if a more equitable system of sharing wealth were applied.

There are six key concepts of this theory: text, meaning, culture, polysemy, hegemony, and ideology. Culture is a complex concept that refers to the common beliefs, values, social practices, rules, and assumptions that bind a group of people together. It is studied through the practices and texts of everyday life. Text is the object of analysis. Meaning is the interpretations that people take away from the text. The term polysemy refers to the assumption that different people create different meanings. Ideology is contained in texts as a specific set of ideas or beliefs, particularly regarding social and political subjects. Hegemony is also called the power relationships and dominances. Hegemony depends on the dominated group's accepting its position as natural and normal and believing that the status quo is in its best interest. Hegemony exists only if it is accepted by both groups with continual negotiation.

The members of the Frankfurt School applied and extended Marxism into the cultural life of a society. Some of the most outstanding figures of the first generation of critical theorists are Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Friedrich Pollock (1894-1970), Leo Lowenthal (1900-1993), Eric Fromm (1900-1980). The "first generation" of critical theorists spent most of their time re-qualifying Hegel's dialectics on a functional and conceptual level. But since the 1970s, the "second generation" has been led by Jürgen Habermas, who has made significant contributions to encouraging the conversation between the so-called "continental" and "analytical" traditions. This period was followed by the "third generation" of critical theorists, who were significantly influenced by the prominent German scholar – Axel Honneth. In general, intellectuals from Frankfurt School soon realized the similarity between the way big firms controlled the production of economic goods and how big companies controlled the production of cultural goods. This idea was applied in the field of mass communication. It is not difficult to recognize how radio industry, motion picture studios, newspapers and magazines publishers, and later television business have adopted the capitalist model of production. As an example, during the Depression of the 1930s, instead of being supported a different economic or political system, media figures followed other trend, which favored glitzy musicals and comedies, stories of common people who get a break and make it

big despite bad economic times... The core idea appeared in much of the writing of members of the Frankfurt School was the mass culture and exploitation. In other words, the media was perceived to be extremely powerful and pervasive. This viewpoint was criticized for being pessimistic and gloomy, as they didn't recognize the power of the audience.

Next capstone in the history of critical theory appeared in Great Britain during the late 1950s and the early 1960s. Scholars at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University pointed out several examples from the British working class to argue with the idea of underestimating the ability of audiences among intellectuals from Frankfurt School. Specifically, British scholars indicated that members of the working class used the products of mass culture to define their own identities through the way they dressed, the types of music they listened to, the hairstyles they favored... The argument continued to higher level when British scholars denied the extremely powerful role of media in manipulating the audience. Rather, they argued that there was a more complicated relationship. This idea then was effectively supported by studies of film and television. Results from many researches at that time suggested that although films and television exposures had tried to reinforce their preferred meanings on people, viewers, however, had their choices to come up with their own meanings.

Two most prominent ideas in the development of critical theory were the belief that values were represented in the content and the fact that audiences were not passive. From its earliest form that embraced the analytical ideas of Karl Marx, the perspective of critical theory then was extended by many scholars to class, race, and with the growth of feminist studies, gender. Values were still maintained and portrayed in the media among contents. In Britain and later in the United States, the dominant values were embraced by images of white, upper class, Western males. Although the media consciously presented images that aimed to maintain the dominant values, the audiences could supply their own meanings to the content. A variety of researches had been conducted during this time to catalogue how various audience members interpret content in different ways. One of the most outstanding studies examined how the audience made sense of a British TV program, *Nationwide*. The results suggested that audiences created all three kinds of meanings: preferred meaning, in which viewers accepted the dominant messages; negotiated meaning that contained of somewhat different interpretation; and oppositional meaning, which was established by a group of young blacks who were not part of the mainstream.

The next important stage in the development of critical theory took place in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. The critical perspective was adopted by communication researchers and scholars engaged in feminist studies. Inequality is the core factor in both analytical ideas of Marxism and feminist study. While Karl Marx saw the inequalities in the way wealth and power were distributed in society, feminist researchers indicated that inequalities stemmed from “patriarchy”. Feminism found several prominent examples especially from advertising where the natural place for a woman is in the home or that looking good is the preferred way for women to achieve success. Other topics of concern for critical theorists were also effectively examined such as the ritual role of mass communication, the way cultural myths are embodied in mass communication, or the way popular media programs utilize the collective myths of a culture...Without doubt, critical theory that embraced cultural perspective is multidimensional and encompasses a wide variety of topics and analytic methods.

Reader response theory

Reader response theory is an outstanding example for the core idea of critical perspective about the active role of the audience. In contrast to many other theories that focused on the author or the content and form of the work, reader response theory examined the role of mass media on society by paying attention to the reader and their experience of a literary work. This theory supported the idea that audiences were not totally manipulated by media figures. Rather, viewers were recognized to have an active role in creating their own meaning by applying their own interpretation. Reader response theory offered an opposite perspective to the idea from earlier theories, which concluded that mass media have a powerful role and can easily manipulate the audience.

The idea of investigating the role of reader in creating the meaning and experience of a literary work although has long been a topic of discussion. However, it wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s when it actually drew a serious attention by several scholars and researchers. During this period of time, most prominent scholars were dominated in the United States and Germany such as Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and Roland Barthes. However, reader response theory traces its root back to the work of I. A. Richards, *“Literature as Exploration”* (1938). In this book, he argued that it is important for the teacher to avoid imposing any “preconceived notions about the proper way to react to any work”⁽¹⁾.

In its simplest form, reader response theory considers readers' reactions to literature as vital to interpreting the meaning of the text. However, there are multiple approaches that can be applied within the idea of the theory. There are two main ways to classify those approaches. The first way separates different perspectives into five categories: transactional reader-response theory, affective stylistics, subjective reader-response theory, psychological reader-response theory, and social reader-response theory. The first group led by Louise Rosenblatt, involves a transaction between the text's inferred meaning and the individual interpretation by the reader influenced by their personal emotions and knowledge. Established by Stanley Fish, the affective stylistics category suggests a relationship between the meaning and the reader. In other words, a text cannot have meaning independent of the reader. Subjective reader-response theory, which was associated with David Bleich, examines the reader's response by comparing written responses to other individual interpretations. The fourth group employed by Norman Holland, indicates that a reader's motives heavily affect how they read, and subsequently use this reading to analyze the psychological response of the reader. The final group, social reader-response theory established by Stanley Fish, believes that any individual interpretation of a text is created in an interpretive community of minds consisting of participants who share a specific reading and interpretation strategy. Another way to classify reader-response approaches is to divide reader response theorists into three groups: "individualists" who focus on individual reader's experience; "experimenters" who apply psychological experiments on a defined set of readers; and "uniformists" who assume an uniform response from all readers. Although reader response theorists have examined the role of readers from different perspective, according to Tyson, "...reader-response theorists share two beliefs: 1) that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and 2) that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature"⁽²⁾.

There are numerous studies that employed reader response theory as main argument. For instance, Scott (1994) in his article "*The bridge from text to mind: Adapting reader-response theory to consumer research*"⁽³⁾ showed that rather than being a ready-made model, reader-response theory is a group of critics who share the agenda of moving from theories of text to the study of reading. The idea of reader-response theory has been applied to a variety of study fields such as feminism, education, or phenomenology. Among many attempts of

applying reader-response theory to examine cultural phenomenon, Linda M. Scott argued a new pathway of using reader-response theory in the field of consumer research on advertising response. The article in general has pointed out the need of considering advertising as “artifacts of culture” – texts that are “*a distinctive feature of postindustrial life, at once familiar and fantastic*”⁽⁴⁾. Thereby, advertisements should be put in a connection with consumer’s real world experience and interpretation within the everyday life.

The article offers several pathways to apply reader-response approach to advertising. Adopting the notion of active audience from reader-response theory, Scott denied the statement about passive and lazy reader in many previous studies by indicating that readers are capable of being rational, selective, active, and skeptical in the process of reading advertising texts. This argument encourages future consumer research in advertising to consider a more important role of reader’s mind rather than underestimating the ability of audiences. As an example, Scott stated, “We might begin reconceptualizing this consumer by studying the imaginative thought required to read ads using metaphorical pictures or fanciful dramas...an important aspect of human mental experience: the work of imagination”⁽⁵⁾. By accepting that viewers are not only passively reading ads, but also being able to interpreting texts in the relationship with their own experiences and imagination world, studies of consumer research in advertising are offered a more comprehensive perspective of investigation.

The idea of active readers was used by the author to emphasize the need of exploring the relationship between text and situation as well as inference and past experience in information-processing research. Similar to other kinds of text, advertising messages are conducted and perceived within a cultural concept. Thus, studying individual responses to advertising texts can be a useful way to examine the influence of social, cultural, and historical forces. In general, “*The move to a reader-response orientation would provide a link between the study of advertising and the study of consumption similar to the very useful bridge already built between rhetoric and cultural anthropology*”⁽⁶⁾.

Another prominent example was the article “Reading logs: an application of reader-response theory in ELT” - Carlisle, A. (2000)⁽⁷⁾. One of the practical forms of reader-response theory that is effectively applied in educational field is reading logs. The article of Anthony Carlisle is a prominent example of how reader-response theory has been applied to EFL literature teaching. This article also extends this application by focusing on foreign language readers

rather than native speakers. Adopting the idea of active audience from reader-response theory, the author used reading logs as the simplest and most direct tool to investigate readers' response to literature. Benton introduced the concept of reading logs in 1985 as a way to examine the dialogue between reader and text. In comparison to other forms of classroom activities, reading logs requires students to write down their own experiences while in the act of reading (Benton, 1985)⁽⁸⁾.

The article provided two important terms: efferent and aesthetic transaction. The core difference between these terms is the former refers to the act of reading for information while the latter favors the act of reading literature. In general, when a reader focuses on the information that he or she can recall after reading, he or she involves in the process of efferent transaction. On the other hand, when attention is paid on the experience of reading itself, the reader goes through an aesthetic transaction. According to Carlisle, the second group of readers shares similarity with EFL readers, whose reading experience is often equivalent to one long comprehension exercise. In fact, when involving in the process of aesthetic transaction, the reader will be engaged in a secondary world, which according to Benton and Fox, contained of four separate processes: anticipating/retrospecting, picturing, interacting, and evaluating. These four aspects were then applied to construct the reading logs in order to explore the secondary worlds of the readers.

The study applied reading logs tool on 50 19-20 year-old undergraduates reading English at a junior college in Taiwan. The texts of investigating were two novels: *The Quiet American* and *The Great Gatsby*. Time frame for the study was described as three 50-minute classes a week, each novel was taught in each semester at a rate of one chapter every other week, the week in between was used to teach in class a short essay from *The Norton Reader*. Participants were required to make their own reading logs during each reading section, which then would be discussed with the professor and other classmates. A detailed plan of teaching process as well as examples from students' reading logs are presented in the article as supporters for the following conclusion.

The highlight from the result was the positive response from students as they indicated that the reading logs experience provided clearer understanding of the ideas in the novels. Moreover, the reading logs were effectively used during the discussion section as they reveled the real experience that the readers had during the reading process. Further, the reading logs also appeared to be helpful for not only enhancing reading and writing skill, but also reducing difficulty

for students in the formal exams. An interesting finding of the article is how these participants have applied their own lives as students in Taiwan in their responses to the two novels.

Final thought

Literary criticism, cultural studies and political economy theories present two main ideas regarding the effect of mass media. The first argument is for the ineffective role of media figures on enhancing useful social changes by embracing the *status quo*. The second assumption concerns with the ability of people to resist media's influences. This idea also exists as a challenge for the power of dominant elite groups in the society. Critical theory is a special form of cultural theory in which theorists based their critique towards existing social problem on a set of specific social values. This kind of theory is often supported by solutions for changes. In its simplest form, the nature of these theories is explained in the way mass media affects society by influencing cultural changes. Several quantitative and qualitative researches have been conducted to examine the effects mass media has on society as well as possible long-term consequences of the cultural changes. In general, mass media can affect the society because it can affect the process of creating, learning, sharing, and applying culture in every society./.

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