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ABSTRACT   This article will consider in detail the implications of a diffuse social imagination for existing paradigms of ethnographic audience research. The notion of a 'cultural field' research model will be offered here as an alternative structure for locating media communities as sites of social practice. This is a theoretical framework that reformulates the conception of media audiences as 'imagined communities' by replacing a demographically constituted ethnographic model with an emphasis on surveying the diverse inhabitants of a cultural field constructed around participation in particular instances of media practice.

KEYWORDS   cultural studies, ethnography, globalization, media audiences

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to raise some of the theoretical and methodological considerations that arose during my recent research into the transnational dimensions of Indian film culture. As such, I will not present any of the material collected in the course of that study, nor any of its conclusions (for this, see Athique, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). Instead, I seek here to share some of the understandings and position-takings that informed the conceptualization and execution of that research, and which might have some useful bearing on thinking about other transnational media audiences as communities linked by cultural practices and, more broadly still, about media audiences as sites of discourse and as objects for social research. Ultimately, I will elaborate upon the notion of a 'cultural field' as a theoretical framework that reformulates the conception of media audiences as 'imagined communities' by replacing a demographically constituted ethnographic model with an emphasis on surveying the diverse inhabitants of a cultural field constructed, and radically contextualized, around participation in particular instances of media practice.

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There were three pressing practical reasons for conceptualizing and adopting this approach in my recent research. First of all, at the outset, the volunteers who identified themselves as interested in Indian films in the study area constituted a genuinely multi-ethnic body. Second, their object of mutual interest was demonstrably transnational and cross-media in its economic and discursive structures. Third, the media environment that the volunteers inhabited (Australia) was itself characterized by complex transnational media practices. It became necessary, therefore, to revisit the theorization of the media audience because the existing paradigms for researching audiences (as citizen-spectators of a national media, as demographically constituted minority-subjects in national space or as re-territorialized global ethnicities) did not appear to allow for an adequate analysis of the imaginative relations constructed around media artefacts in the culturally diverse and media-rich societies that much of the world's population now inhabits. By contrast, the notion of a cultural field appeared to offer more interesting possibilities for media research in this much untidier, but undeniably compelling, version of our world.

The imagination as a social fact

To begin with, the investigation of what might be called the extra-territorial life of the Indian movie was inevitably implicated in the wider discussions surrounding the contemporary manifestations of the phenomena collectively referenced as 'globalization'. This is a context within which transnational cultural relationships are seen as both effective and reflective components of a world marked by increasingly mobile forms of understanding and agency. It is within this context that Arjun Appadurai has claimed that modernity is no longer confined to a centre–periphery model of transmission, and that in the contemporary imagination modernity has become 'decisively at large' (Appadurai, 1996: 3). Appadurai presents 'a theory of rupture that takes media and migration as its two major, and interconnected, diacritics and explores their joint effect on the *work of the imagination* as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity' (1996: 3), going as far as to suggest that a 'mobile and unforeseeable relationship between mass-mediated events and migratory audiences defines the core of the link between globalization and the modern' (1996: 4). From this perspective, Appadurai points to the role played by transnational media currents in shaping and sustaining equally transnational audiences by addressing 'deterritorialized' ethnic subjectivities, which he describes as 'diasporic public spheres' (1996: 22).

There is, of course, an important 'pre-globalization' antecedent to such an argument. Over 20 years ago, Benedict Anderson ([1983] 1991) famously posited the effects of media use upon the imagination as a transformative force in the socialization of a modern community. Anderson claimed that participation in the new mass audiences facilitated by the

emergence of print media encouraged individuals to imagine themselves as part of larger and more abstracted social formations. The 'work of the imagination', which is so central to Appadurai's notion of 'modernity at large', is a good example of how the influence of Anderson's notion of an 'imagined community' has informed subsequent discussion on the ways in which interactions between media practices and social identification serve to shape relational subjectivities. The widespread adoption of this model of describing audiences by scholars in media studies, and the extension of his own observations in later work to encompass 'the representations of popular performance' (Anderson, 1998: 29), has provided much of the conceptual ground for consumers of visual media to be considered as communities. Although Anderson's explanation can be called technologically deterministic, it is much less so if we focus on the communicative content of the media rather than simply the existence of its infrastructure. From this view, communities arising from media use must be seen as culturally constructed collectives. Media technologies themselves may indicate the potential, and even the inevitability, of modern community formation, but they cannot of themselves explain the *nature* of such communities. Therefore, if the connection that Anderson proposes between media sources and communal identity is to be accepted, what then requires a great degree of further study is the nature of the imaginings which make such relations possible. On that basis, it seems quite perplexing that much of the subsequent research on 'imagined communities' has focused overwhelmingly on the latter part of that couplet.

By contrast, what I will seek to do here is to clarify what an emphasis on imagination implies in the practical context of social research. I adopt the premise that imagination is not simply a device for the narration of abstract symbolic relations. The imagination is understood as connecting humanity with the material world, providing the terrain for collaboration in social behaviours with a seemingly endless potential for transformation. It is conceded that imagination cannot be concretely understood either at the individual level addressed by psychoanalysis or as the massified social force addressed by the grand narratives of political thought. Nonetheless, since I am concurring with the claims of both Anderson and Appadurai that it is in the imagination that social identity exists, it becomes necessary to investigate the actions and articulations which seek to return the imagination to the realm from which it draws its inspiration. The subsequent discussion of the work of the social imagination will therefore be focused upon the imprint of what is produced by such 'actions and articulations' − namely, culture. Culture is seen here as the product of imagination, and the sum of cultural production as constructing the order of social life. In this sense, culture is ultimately as vast and unknowable as the imagination. However, since I have positioned cultural practice as *manifest* imagination, it is logical that its manifestation can at least be observed in part.

Appadurai puts the 'electronic' visual media at the heart of contemporary global discourse, locating transnational media practices as both catalysts and primary evidence of a changing world:

> The world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life. To grasp this new role, we need to bring together the old idea of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt School sense); the idea of the imagined community (in Anderson's sense); and the French idea of the imaginary (*imaginaire*) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations, which is no more and no less real than the collective representations of Emile Durkheim, now mediated through the complex prism of modern media. The image, the imagined, the imaginary − these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice ... The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order. (Appadurai, 1996: 31)

The 'complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes' and the 'imagination as a social practice' are clearly central to any conceptualization of contemporary media audiences. However, I am less inclined to accept Appadurai's 'theory of rupture' itself, where the imagination has been largely subject to the imposition of a radical new form by the deterministic power of electronic media. Instead, the transformative power of print media (discussed by Anderson) and of electronic media (discussed by Appadurai) might be seen as points of exponential increase in the potential of dialogic technologies which are nonetheless *subject* in their creation to the aspirations of the imagination. As Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davies (2002: 325) have stated: 'The faculty of the imagination not only conditions *how* sensual data are transformed into conscious knowledge ... the imagination is also fundamental to *why*, *whether* and *what* we are ready to experience, perceive and know in the first place.' If media technologies are catalytic forces acting upon the imagination, then they are also in themselves outcomes of cultural practices (science, commerce, leisure, politics) that are shaped by the imagination. The imagination as social practice may not, therefore, be a radically new phenomenon, but a persistent discursive mode through which the phantasms of the 'modern' and 'traditional', and the 'global' and 'local', have appeared historically. On that basis, I feel that I must contest Appadurai's claim that due to the advent of the electronic media:

> the imagination has broken out of the special expressive space of art, myth, and ritual and has now become a part of the quotidian mental work of ordinary people in many societies. It has entered the logic of ordinary life from which it had largely been successfully sequestered ... it is no longer a matter of specially endowed (charismatic) individuals, injecting the imagination where it does not belong. Ordinary people have begun to deploy their imaginations in the practice of their everyday lives. (1996: 5)

I believe that it remains an equally valid proposition to consider the imagination of ordinary people as a powerful historical force. It is absurd to suggest that the 'ordinary' have ever lacked an imagination or the ability to use it. 'Specially endowed' leaders might be better seen as successful applicants to roles emerging under the influence of various cumulative forces of human imagination, rather than prophetic figures, emerging from a vacuum, with big ideas. In that sense, the 'special expressive place of art, myth and ritual' in different temporal and social conditions has always been *created* and *defined* in the first place by the cultural logic of everyday life. It is therefore possible, necessary even, to challenge Appadurai's analysis on the grounds that it demonstrates a certain ahistoricism as well as a lack of democratic credentials. However, for my purposes, what gives great strength to Appadurai's reading of the mediated social imagination is not his 'theory of rupture', but his (paradoxical?) emphasis on 'everyday cultural practice through which the work of the imagination is transformed' (1996: 9). So whereas much of the recent discussion of media globalization has been largely concerned with media hubs, media flows and thus, primarily, media production, Appadurai has emphasized instead the role of media consumption in the social imagination:

> it is wrong to assume that the electronic media are the opium of the masses. This view, which is only beginning to be corrected, is based upon the notion that the mechanical arts of reproduction largely reprimed ordinary people for industrial work. It is far too simple. There is growing evidence that the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and in general, *agency* … this is not to suggest that consumers are free agents, living happily in a world of safe malls, free lunches, and quick fixes … Nevertheless, where there is consumption there is pleasure, and where there is pleasure there is agency. (1996: 7)

The next step, therefore, towards an imaginative approach to media audiences is to shift the discussion of media *cultures* away from the political economies of production and towards the variable conditions of media reception in a world structured semantically by transnational politics: a world that is, nonetheless, inhabited by human beings enjoying a measure of discursive agency.

Media studies, ethnographic practice and the 'situated imagination'

One of the major constitutive features of Anderson's model of the 'imagined community' was that it emphasized the common over the particular, suggesting that each member of an imagined community conceives of other unknown members in terms of a 'deep horizontal comradeship' or 'fraternity' (Anderson, [1983] 1991: 7). In turn, the social model of media studies has tended to assume that each viewer hypothetically positions

29

other viewers as taking part in the same mythic and textual engagement, of watching the same film *similarly*. While this sameness of experience might be said to have been disproved consistently by qualitative research into 'active' audiences, it is a subjective illusion which certainly continues to influence how we relate our personal media use to a wider social sphere. As a paradigm for media research, however, the use of an 'imagined community' argument in this form tends to rely on the prior establishment of a collective entity under terms that are extraneous to media use. I mean by this that it is in circumstances where shared media use is in the first place coterminous with other parameters of social classification that the notion of imagined community most typically forms the basis for a large-scale reading of social identification. It is often assumed that where a relatively discrete community can be established, in terms of nationality, ethnicity, class or otherwise, the media practices of that categorical group can be analysed in order to make a cultural assessment of the collective social imagination of a 'community'. This can be done empirically (through observation), qualitatively (through interviews), or psychoanalytically (through textual analysis related to a hypothetical, generic member of that group). In the context of my own area of research, some useful examples of this approach might be the well-known work of Marie Gillespie (1995) in the UK or, in Australia, the studies included in Cunningham and Sinclair's (2000) edited collection *Floating Lives*, and in particular, the contribution of Manas Ray (2000), which has also been published elsewhere (Ray, 2003).

The great benefit of an ethnographic study in this form, analysing trends in media use among a categorically defined community, is that it possesses a certain narrative cohesion, since it dovetails neatly with demographic understandings of human populations as constituted by a series of classifiable types. In considering the drawbacks, however, it is first of all worth recognizing that most anthropologists have long conceded that there is no such thing as a homogeneous cultural community with fixed boundaries. Faye Ginsburg, for example, states that an investigation of the 'social relations of media production, circulation, and reception' requires an understanding of how even a single audience subject may be the site of plural and complex social identities' (Ginsburg, 2002: 363). In the anthropology of the contemporary media, researchers need to consider a subject employing multiple identities interacting with an object which is itself active across multiple social terrains. Therefore, any investigation of media reception, and of the construction of social meanings, has to be considered as an enquiry that juxtaposes what are essentially moving objects.

Even without facing this challenge to cultural identity as a reliable anthropological meter, a media audience is not likely to fit absolutely with any identified social group. A 'blunt' ethnographic approach towards media audiences is likely to ignore such discrepancies. This is particularly tempting when there is a demonstrably high incidence of a given media

practice among the population in question – few would deny, for example, that the audience for Indian movies is comprised of Indians in large part. However, there are in fact millions of non-Indians who also watch Indian films, and any inclination to look at the use of media in identity construction by Indians as a nexus of globalized cultural positioning should also be tempered by the recognition that it is equally true that there are many Indians who do not watch Indian films. If we position the consumption of films as constitutive of an act of cultural maintenance or ethnic belonging, it would still be absurd to suggest that those who do not patronize Indian films are, on that basis, relatively lacking in Indian-ness. To complicate matters even further, in a more connected world, viewers are almost certainly not fixated upon any single media diet. To presume otherwise almost inevitably leads to essentialism of the following kind: all Indians are obsessed with Indian movies and this is an essential component, and therefore measure, of their identity (and no-one else's). In such a reading, non-Indian fans of Indian movies and Indians who are not movie fans (or are fans of other kinds of movies) become marginalized as agents whose behaviour is anomalous to the normative conditions set by the research paradigm. This is because their 'social identity' as inhabitants of a certain 'ethnicity' cannot be correlated directly, and empirically, to their personal practices of media consumption – a thornier problem for cultural studies, perhaps, than for those individuals themselves.

A more sophisticated, or 'situated', ethnographic approach towards media audiences takes into account the heterogeneity of the population in question and the internal contradictions which are likely to exist within it. It also recognizes the external influences that both reinforce and destabilize the social identity of the group. In its most convincing form, a situated approach seeks to evaluate the whole range of cultural practices present within a sampled group; these might be variously constituted as forms of production–reproduction, import–export and relation–translation. In attempting to do justice to the complexity of social life, a situated study cannot plausibly be restricted to, or draw conclusions from, media use alone. In this sense, the situated model of media ethnography is much closer to the classical anthropological model where an extensive cultural enquiry into social relations must be enacted in order to contextualize adequately the discussion of any particular detail. Correspondingly, where the situated ethnographic method is most useful is in understanding the context of media use within a given locality which can be observed either in totality or by a reasonably dense sample – thus a household, a street, a suburb. In addition, as with more contemporary anthropology, studies of this kind must also account for the temporal dimension – the recognition that all cultural practices are dynamic and change over time without necessarily becoming 'corrupted' or less 'authentic' behaviours. The situated model becomes difficult to apply successfully when dealing with large populations, such as metropolitan or national audiences, or with

dispersed social formations which can only be identified in the first place as a 'community' through the application of an essentialism of some kind, at which point a 'blunt' ethnography is almost inevitable.

The distinction that I have sought to establish between two different forms of ethnographic practice, which have arguably become implicitly positioned here as examples of good and bad practice, is instrumental and can only be loosely determined. Ethnographic studies will most likely combine both 'blunt' and 'situated' elements within their research practice according to the available means and the context of the research. This does not mean all such media studies are essentialist and therefore compromised, and in any case the essentialist problem also arises when using other methodologies. Nonetheless, Arild Fetveit (2001) is probably right to point out that any assumption that human research is of necessity *less* essentialist than textual research of the human condition is dangerous, and most likely, indefensible. For some, the benefits of ethnographic practice operate along a quantitative scale, where research based on a handful of subjects is seen to be a less solid or 'rigorous' basis for conjecture than a study that includes thousands. However, sample size, while indubitably contributing depth to a study, has surprisingly little bearing on the likely occurrence of essentialism. This is at least partly because a preponderance towards essentialism is built into any signifying system. This is a problem which can therefore only be partially overcome through intellectual diligence, both by researchers and their readership. In the case of media-centric ethnography, however, I think there is a significant additional danger in the transfer of ethnographic models of community from classical anthropological studies to a media-research environment. It is worth recalling Philip Schlesinger's observation (2000: 21) that there has typically been an internalist focus towards the socializing agency of media in modern communications theory, rather than an emphasis on mediated exchange across social groups. If this internalist focus is coupled with the use of ethnographic terminology originally developed by anthropologists for the analysis of what were then presumed to be relatively stable and located cultural communities, there is likely to a bias towards conceiving of a media audience as a discrete, and culturally similar, population.

In order to correlate the methodological dimension of this argument with the theoretical basis from which we began, it is necessary to consider the nature of the social imagination at work in the ethnographic method. In the first place, ethnography is an empirical tradition that seeks to manufacture situated knowledge. The *nature* of this situated knowledge derives from its origin within the lived social relations from which it is purportedly drawn, and for which it provides evidence. The *authority* of situated knowledge in ethnographic practice is based upon the particularity of the quantitative and/or qualitative evidence gathered at any site of social practice, but the ultimate *production* of that knowledge nonetheless occurs elsewhere. While the authority of situated knowledge is located in the

research subject, the *agency* inherent in the production of such knowledge is epistemological. It occurs at the moment where quantitative data is inscribed with meaning through qualified explanation and, conversely, where qualitative data is assumed by extension to represent a social truth operating at a larger scale. The moment of epistemological agency is a moment of position-taking, one where the creative imagination of the researcher *claims* situated knowledge. It is, of necessity, a point at which articulations of various individual and collective senses of self and other are defined, stabilized and inter-related from a particular standpoint.

Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davies make the argument, generally accepted I think, that the production of situated knowledge can no longer base its authority upon the masking notions of an objective research position or a universal set of truths within which any particular manifestation of social practice or location can be encapsulated. Stoetzler and Yuval-Davies propose instead that the production of situated knowledge should be predicated in the first place upon the notion of a 'situated imagination'. They indicate that the idea of a situated subject has received substantial discussion under the guise of standpoint theories which:

> claim, in somewhat different ways, that it is vital to account for the social positioning of the social agent. This accounting for the situatedness of the knowing subject has been used epistemologically in standpoint theories in at least two different ways: the first claims that a specific social situatedness … endows the subject with a privileged access to truth; the other … rejects such a position and views the process of approximating truth as part of a dia-logical relationship among subjects who are differentially situated. (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002: 315)

The first set of perspectives on the significance of subjective positioning is one which invokes the *authoritative* ethnographic subject. This is the position which allows for only a subject occupying a particular social cat-egory to speak for others in that category. It is predicated upon the inimical difference of any given subjective position as categorized by ideologies of class, gender, ethnicity, faith, etc., when compared to another subject position categorized differently under the same terms. This is the point where subjectivity becomes identity, and where individual characteristics are assumed to merge with collectives of shared categorization. A more 'rigorous' approach would most likely require the matching of several strata of subject categorization in order to construct the authoritative informant as a representative embodiment of a purported subject position. The overall premise, however, remains the same.

By contrast, the second set of perspectives seeks instead to emphasize the *particular situatedness* of experiential understandings, and thus subjective agency, in each and any case. In this model, every subject possesses a dif-ferent standpoint, constructed around their own imaginative interactions with various ideological and material articulations of the social imaginary.

The agency of subjects stems from their ability to imagine creatively the complex interfaces between individual *experiential* and collective *relational* ontologies. This 'situated imagination' of subjects suggests a far greater degree of agency for media viewers than that which might be measured by choices of consumption alone. It is far more individuated than the model of agency which allows the authoritative ethnographic research subject to stand for, but *only* for, a collective expression of similar social type. Nonetheless, freed of the burden of representing anything other than their own standpoint, subjects must of necessity still articulate their *relation* to others in order to describe their own position. On this basis, this 'situated imagination' is also a site where situated knowledge is produced and contested, in a form which might be defined as anchored 'in actual social practices (that are linked, but not reducible to certain social positionings)' (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davies, 2002: 317).

The integrity of knowledge purported to originate in the 'situated imagination' is more difficult to 'claim' at the moment of writing, since it operates without a normative representative position and can only be managed imaginatively by the researcher. Here, epistemological authority does not rest upon an ability to provide explanation, but on an ability to successfully convey the *relatively* different explanations of others, which in turn the reader may compare to their own imaginative position. The agency arising from this form of producing knowledge is not concentrated in any writer, speaker or reader; it is widespread throughout the communicative process. This model of the research relationship also appears to be somewhat analogous to the model of social imagination which it is intended to describe, that is, a dialogic relationship constructed across a variety of subjective standpoints which are created imaginatively by socially situated agents.

The cultural field as a site of relational imagining

A critical understanding of the semantic production of situated knowledge underpinning ethnographic enquiries has great significance for the construction of any alternative relational model of the media audience – something which I believe is absolutely necessary for establishing clarity of both terminology and intent in audience research. The alternative that I propose here rests upon the conception of a media audience as inhabitants of a 'cultural field' centred on the media product in question. The community referenced here is simply formulated as a population constructed through their participation in the production, distribution or consumption of a media artefact. This artefact is further perceived of as having the potential to enact diverse cultural dialogues across a wide and variegated social space. It is not assumed that members of the audience pre-possess a shared *identity* which can be measured through the product itself.

It does, however, assume that they have a shared interest (for example, in a certain source or genre of film culture), and that mapping the different subjective positions from which they imagine or *identify* those cultural artefacts is most useful, not for the centralizing of the object itself, but rather for an analysis of the position-takings and agencies at play in the articulation of the social experiences that surround it.

Despite the obvious similarity of the term 'cultural field', the notion I am employing here differs from Pierre Bourdieu's seminal *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993). This is primarily a question of purpose. My concern is not with a systematic power structure of aesthetics or the hierarchies of production, but with the varied situation of cultural consumption. Nonetheless, it may be worth considering Bourdieu's theory in order to make these distinctions more apparent. For Bourdieu, the 'field of cultural production' is an area of activity bounded by an internal logic which exists within a hierarchy of larger homologous fields (of power, economics, education), but which is nonetheless relatively autonomous from them. The field is inhabited by active agents involved in the production of cultural forms, who struggle to achieve hegemony over the means of production, and thus the field itself. It is this struggle for control which creates volition within the field, and in this sense the cultural field reflects the 'social relations of which these symbolic systems are a more or less transformed expression' (1993: 32). Bourdieu describes the field of culture as an 'economic world reversed', where the symbolic capital being contested has an inverse value to its economic potential. It is in this way that the superiority of a 'restricted field', described as the 'most perfectly autonomous sector of the field of cultural production, where the only audience aimed at is other producers' is preserved (1993: 39). It is in this way that Bourdieu describes the divide between elite culture and popular culture.

What structures Bourdieu's cultural field is not only the internal logic of an economic world reversed, but also the 'position-takings' of agents (cultural producers). In turn, their position in the field is relative to their contestation of the 'legitimate' form of cultural production as well as subject to the influence of their *habitus*. The habitus is the product of their education (the sum of familial, institutional and diffuse didacticism), and it is this which gives them the means to comprehend the code of the cultural product in question and the rules of the field. This ability in turn allows them to unconsciously translate the 'cultural capital' inherent to the field into the maintenance or improvement of their position in the field, or into other forms of capital (economic, political, educational). Bourdieu claims that habitus produces a superior understanding of forms closer to the 'restricted field' by members of the dominant classes, since cultural capital is distributed unevenly among social classes acculturated for different purposes. A suitable habitus is required to 'enter' the field of cultural production, and some are more suitable than others, according to its system of

value. From this perspective, Bourdieu sees the role of the cultural field, as with the educational field, as reinforcing class differences found in the fields of power and economics. So despite the relative autonomy of the cultural field, the collective effect of their habitus upon agents generates practices within the field that reinforce class relations.

The 'cultural field' research model that I propose has goals, and assumptions, which are markedly different from the prerogatives that guide Bourdieu's use of the term 'field'. First of all, I reject even a qualified notion that there are other fields, such as economics or power, which exist outside of the realm of culture. Culture, as I have described it here, is the sum of 'actions and articulations' stemming from the human imagination, and as such represents the totality of social life. Commerce and politics are both cultural activities, and they are neither outside of, nor autonomous in relation to, culture; nor is any observable instance of cultural practice autonomous in relation to their influence. In short, I am unconvinced by variants of the base–superstructure argument that present capitalism as a force external to the social imagination. However, even when taken on its own terms as a realm of activity distinct from other forms of practice, Bourdieu's 'field of cultural production' represents a different understanding of the cultural in certain key areas. First of all is his insistence that the 'restricted production' of high cultures is inherently of greater symbolic worth than the 'mass production' of popular culture. Such a formulation only makes sense where the term 'culture' is made effectively synonymous with the term 'art', which is, in all fairness, the consistent object of Bourdieu's attention. However, it is not my intention here to make any explicit or implicit value judgement between different formations of cultural practice.

There are also differences in approach, which I wish to emphasize when we turn from the hierarchical principles that structure Bourdieu's field and focus instead on its inhabitants. The agents within Bourdieu's field are all in some sense involved in the production of cultural artefacts. He attributes little, or no, agency to the consumers of those artefacts, which implies that they exist outside the field of cultural production and have no meaningful influence upon it. Bourdieu rejects 'the hypothesis of the spontaneous correspondence or deliberate matching of production to demand or commissions' (1993: 34). He is only able to do so, I would suggest, by first supposing that commercial activities are of necessity peripheral to the field and that the centre of the field is 'perfectly autonomous' from the need for an audience. This seems to contradict his enquiry into the social relations that constitute cultural production, or at least to limit that enquiry to a 'perfect' closed society of producers. For my purposes, I would concur instead with Appadurai's (1996: 7) formulation that there is also a degree of agency inherent in the consumption of a cultural artefact, and I would suggest that these consuming agents therefore exert a powerful force upon the field associated with it.

Taken together, rejecting the existence of external non-cultural fields and attributing agency to consumers prompts us to re-evaluate the nature of the 'position-takings' within the field. If consumers of cultural products may not all have a vested interest in a struggle for control of the legitimate method of production, then what explains their position as agents within the field? Are there more or less 'perfect' forms of consumption (where the symbolic struggle is for pleasure rather than prestige) to be contested along with those of production? Clearly, if the field is inhabited by both producers and consumers and also contains varied forces or relations of aesthetics, commerce, politics and other forms of social interaction, then its nature as a 'field of struggles' is much more complex. It may not, for example, possess the discernible positive and negative poles which are essential to Bourdieu's formulation. Without the presumption of such a binary struggle, or of a 'perfect' centre, the inculcation of their habitus is left as the sole determinant of the situation of agents in relation to cultural production. However, since processes of education (be they formal or diffuse) are inherently cultural practices, the habitus implies a profoundly structuralist argument; that is, our position in relation to culture is determined by our cultural position. In this case, why should there ever be any movement in the field? The notion of the habitus seems to limit human agency to, at best, an unconscious pursuit in the cultural field of inculcated class interests which are inherent and self-replicating within that field. What place does this leave for the social imagination, as Appadurai (1996: 7) puts it, 'as a staging ground for action'?

Bourdieu's theoretical model of the field of cultural production suffers from its restrictive definition of culture and its elevation of a 'perfect' aesthetic world of cultural production without consumption, not to mention a population of more and less cultured people. If cultural studies has not already discredited such a notion, then it has achieved little. What I would seek to preserve from Bourdieu, however, is the interrogation of the practices which surround a cultural product as essential to an understanding of it, and the presence of both agency and volition within that field of practices. My departure from Bourdieu must be understood in relation to the different contexts of our enquiry. I am seeking to propose a model for the analysis of a cultural artefact which takes into account the varied social practices and environments where that artefact is materially or symbolically present. Bourdieu seeks to construct a hierarchy of cultural production that represents and reinforces class relations. Clearly, these are endeavours of a different kind. However, the notion of a *field*, which is what brings these divergent concerns together in the first place, is extremely important because I believe it offers the best possibility of researching a cultural product not simply in and of itself, nor as a straightforward allegorical transposition of a society or societal group. It differs, therefore, from the demographic model of the media audience since 'what can be constituted

as a system for the sake of analysis' is not assumed to be 'the product of a coherence-seeking intention or an objective consensus' (Bourdieu, 1993: 34). However, I will depart from Bourdieu's subsequent conclusion that the field must therefore be 'the product and prize of a permanent conflict' (1993: 34) and suggest instead that the cultural field is a discursive space representing the area of influence surrounding any given artefact, idea or practice, and that, following Appadurai, this cultural field is defined by the imaginative work of its participants.

The cultural field model is thus conceived as a radial zone of influence within which viewers engage with a cultural artefact for different purposes, and from different standpoints, generating different meanings and pleasures. Within this field of practices participants occupy different positions in relation to the object of interest, ranging from those with a deep degree of investment, either personally or professionally, to those who are disinterested or only dimly aware of the artefact, idea or practice. However, positionality within a field is not restricted to centre and periphery, since it is also affected by the relative influence of other overlapping fields imagined around other ideas and practices, against which participation in this field is understood by participants in relative terms. The inhabitants of any cultural field will therefore understand their participation and situation within that field relative to the intersection of the field with a wide range of other ideas and practices (and therefore other fields) that contribute to their social and cultural literacy. Thus, there is virtually no limit to the number of positionalities available within the field itself. Furthermore, for participants, the imagined relations between themselves, the object at the centre of the field and the fields formed around overlapping ideas or practices are likely to change over time. Therefore, the relative position of agents in a field is also subject to temporal change. Finally, the situation or position-taking of agents will also be articulated relative to the hypothetical presence of other agents within the field – since their own perception of other unknown members of the audience is critical to any variant of the 'imagined community' argument. A cultural field is therefore a dynamic site constructed from the sum of participants understood as a body of diverse and mobile agents engaged in *particular* and *relative* forms of social imagination.

It is particularly helpful to think of media audiences in this way because under the aegis of 'globalization', any community imagined through media use is likely to be shaped by multiple practices of cultural consumption and association. This is precisely because what most characterizes the contemporary media as a discursive force in society is its multiple sources and its intertextuality. It is also hoped that the notion proposed here of a cultural field may facilitate a more dynamic enquiry into both the media artefact in question and the social imagination that surrounds it than the arbitrary or 'blunt' imposition of sameness upon members of any audience under the guise of 'identity'. The cultural field model, unlike demo-

graphically constituted ethnographic enquiry, does not bear the burden of providing a *representative* sample of a collective truth. What it allows for is the inclusion of participants whose situated imaginations have a bearing upon the enquiry; the wider the enquiry, the larger the field from which they can be drawn. Nonetheless, in a certain sense a 'cultural field' model of analysis still represents an arbitrary closure. It recognizes that no artefact, idea or practice is a discrete entity, but nonetheless delimits the size of the field being surveyed solely in relation to the object of analysis which defines the field *and the questions being asked of it.*

Of course, in any given situation a practical methodological structure remains essential in order to conduct meaningful research into this complex melange of objects, practices and occurrences. Since it remains the case that no practical study is likely to exhaust the range of positionalities and linkages which are extant in any field of cultural practices, what we should seek, through qualitative audience research of this kind, is a *selection* of point samples from within a particular field whose position-takings might be understood in relative terms. In practice, the method of selection will always be conducted along a spectrum of intervention by the researcher, since there can be no perfectly representative subject, nor any method of selection which is truly 'imperfect'. In practice, again, there is only limited equality of position among agents in any qualitative study. The articulate, informed and compliant will always be better represented in scholarly text than their opposites. Rethinking the terrain of qualitative media research, however valuable, is unlikely to be a cure-all for the practical limitations of any applied research work. Nonetheless, the 'cultural field' model as employed in my own modest research activities to date did, I think, reveal a more diverse population interacting with Indian movies in Australia than a 'media-ethnography' would perhaps have allowed. Consequently, that study challenged the notion that ethnic media operated within a multicultural society as closed 'public sphericules' restricted to local and transnational aspects of their 'own' ethnic community (Cunningham, 2001, 2002). Situating the Indian film as the focal point for a field of relations also provided a conceptual basis for exploring not only the material, but also the *imaginative*, relations between industry players and audience members. This, I think, will be an important area of enquiry for media studies in the coming years.

In a general sense, then, the proposition of this 'cultural field' model, and its use in my recent work, has been predicated upon my own position-taking as a researcher. Appadurai, as an anthropologist, remains primarily interested in the cultural lives of human communities, and his interest in the media and globalization is directed towards that goal. This explains his proposition 'that we regard as cultural only those differences that either express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities' and that therefore 'we restrict the term culture as a marked term to the subset of these differences that has been mobilized to articulate the

boundary of difference' (1996: 13). Bourdieu, on the other hand, as a socio-logist, sought a systematic understanding of cultural practice as part of a larger social system. In both these instances, cultural practice has been employed as a means of assessing social groups. However, what I have sought to achieve as a media researcher is, in some senses, the inverse of these enquiries: to interrogate the nature of the social imagination formed around engagement with a media artefact under contemporary conditions. Put simply, what I am proposing here are not new ways of using the media to do sociology, but rather a renewed critical engagement with the sociology of media. This represents an important shift in emphasis, making it necessary to articulate the applicability of the notions of 'field' and 'imaginative relations' in this particular context. By my own reading, the cultural field model has the potential to facilitate innovative audience research and to meet the considerable challenge of remaining situated in lived social relations, without relying on the determining stability of identitarian logics for its authority. Accordingly, I am left feeling that the notion of a 'cultural field', or something like it, may open up exciting possibilities for future media research.

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