

The Mass Audience Lives! (Or Does It?)

Ira Wagman

Adding “Mass” to Mass Audience Studies

We tend to think of the “mass audience” in the simplest of terms. One typically views mass audiences according to perceived notions of behaviour. Audiences for large-scale events, like the Super Bowl, or “So You Think You Can Dance” are conceived of as passive, as being in need of “light” fare, and as being most susceptible to the messages from advertisers and elite opinion. Otherwise we may see mass audiences – and indeed, about cultural texts circulating in the “mainstream” – as operating in stark opposition to things like serious art, to independent opinion which must be delivered to smaller, more serious groups of people able to confront uncomfortable issues. Despite the years of fervent critiques of the mass society thesis, such ideas persist in the popular imagination as a way to characterize those on the production and receiving end of things like blockbuster films or “Idol”. Such “talk” comes as much from industry as from academics, as part of an environment of media pluralism created by an abundance of channels and platforms, by the need of niche operations to deliver audiences to advertisers, and by the emergence of new media players, eager to distinguish themselves from the dreaded “mainstream media”, or MSM. If we acknowledge that such tendencies cannot account for the complex ways that producers and audiences create, distribute, and interact with popular texts, a different approach to the study of mass audiences is needed. In short our appreciation of the mass audience could use more *mass*.

Consider the relationship between the mass audience and cultural nationalism. In Canada ideas about “the mainstream” are a vital feature in popular discourse about culture and are built into the infrastructure of the country’s cultural policies. For many years, Canada’s film and television policies were built around encouraging the production of non-mainstream films and especially not of artifacts produced by the Hollywood cultural “machine”. At the same time cultural nationalists yearn for the day such cultural output would attract a large national audience, to create a shared experience rarely shared by all citizens across a country characterized by regionalism and fragmentation. Therefore we see the lionizing of events like Olympic hockey games or of efforts like “Canada Reads”, a public radio initiative to encourage all Canadians to buy and read the same book. The fact that Canadian television producers recently enjoyed successes on American television through shows like “Flashpoint” and “Rookie Blue” is seen by some as a marker of the industry’s maturity, and by others as symptomatic of its “selling out” of its chance to create a counter-flow of culture in search of a bigger buck. Seeing mainstreaming through the lens of nationalism would render ideas of “audiences” in more complex ways, and would recognize the ways a given text’s “mainstreamness” is both a blessing and a curse to those that make, distribute, and consume it.

Next, consider the idea of mainstream as a form of communication. Scholars typically herald the idea of “speaking to everyone” or “getting the word out” to as many people as a virtue, especially in the political realm. However when those same ideas are applied to television programs they are seen in a suspicious light. What would happen if we saw events like the Super Bowl or “X Factor” less as spectacles and more as attempts by creative staff as part of an attempt to speak to audiences so that everyone can take something away?

These are brief observations on some suggested routes. However, they draw our attention towards a consideration of mass audiences in a more textured way. Here masses would be seen less as cultural dupes or as undifferentiated members of a crowds managed with

messages aimed at “the lowest common denominator” and more as diverse subjects who may come together on certain occasions before slipping back into a different crowd until the next time something speaks to them.