

EQUIPMENT FOR RIFFING: ADVANCED TEXT-READING TACTICS AND POLYVALENT CONSTRAINTS IN *MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATER 3000*

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Since the dawn of the mediated spectacle—from film and television and into the postmodern age of intensifying media saturation and convergence—popular culture has been both creator and reflector of social reality; it seems there is no longer an objective social reality we can access without mediation.¹ Our capacity for decoding mediated reality is inextricable from our ability to make sense of the social world. Debates over audience agency and the roles mediated texts play in the lives of readers have been at the center of a long-running debate among Critical, Cultural, and Rhetorical Studies scholars, among them Michel de Certeau, Celeste Michelle Condit, John Fiske, Stuart Hall, and Henry Jenkins, whose contributions to this dialogue call into question both the possibilities and constraints of media consumers who read pop culture in ways that speak to their own lives while noting that these readings cannot be disentangled from readers' experiences and material realities. What degree of interpretive agency do readers possess? How capable are readers of comprehending and resisting texts containing oppressive discourses? If popular mediated texts are vital in constituting what it means to belong to a particular culture, is media consumption a tool by which readers can resist or subvert dominant ideologies?

A great deal of discourse on questions such as these emerged in the 1980s, a decade which saw key texts such as de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Condit's "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy," Fiske's *Television Culture*, and Hall's "Encoding/Decoding." It is also during this period of cultural flux that the cult television show *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (often abbreviated *MST3K*) entered the U.S. cultural lexicon. During its initial production period (1987-1999), *MST3K* emerged from humble origins as a cable access program at KTMA 23 in Minnesota's Twin Cities to run ten seasons on the Comedy

Channel/Comedy Central (1988-1996) and the Sci-Fi Channel (1997-1999), also spawning a 1996 feature theatrical film. *MST3K* carved out such a legacy that it was named as one of *TIME Magazine's* 100 best TV shows of all time—gushed *TIME*, "This basic-cable masterpiece raised talking back to the TV into an art form" (Poniewozik 2007). *TV Guide* twice anointed *MST3K* among the top twenty-five cult shows of all time. *MST3K* earned a Peabody Award in 1993, as well as Emmy, CableACE, and Saturn Award nominations. The show remains popular in home media and cultural practice well into the 21st century.

MST3K is primarily known for introducing the art of *movie riffing* into the cultural lexicon. Riffing a film or other cultural text, broadly defined, is the act of consuming that text and *in the process of doing so* appropriating it—tactically "poaching" it from its original author(s), context(s), and purpose(s) (De Certeau 1984; Jenkins 1992)—by employing speech acts in ways that actively and conspicuously remake and reframe its meaning. Much of what separates riffing from other interpretive reading practices and models of textual criticism is the fact that the performance of its application (i.e., the bodily acts that constitute the *doing of riffing*) unfolds in real time along with the machinations of the text being riffed. Movie riffing takes its form in marking and responding to specific symbolic content of a film with comments or gestures, often humorous, sarcastic, or informative. Regardless of tone, these riffs palpably (often cumulatively) make new sense of the film. Performative movie riffing, regardless of its tone or delivery, creates an entirely new audiencing experience that is implicitly political; it attempts to usurp the film as the primary medium of entertainment and source of meaning. Although riffing is projected *toward* the film, it speaks *to* the audience, potentially opening avenues for new dialogues on the nature of film, culture, and reality.

Today's cultural marketplace supports two professional riffing troupes, Cinematic Titanic and RiffTrax (both comprised of *MST3K* alumni), as well as riffing acts such as Cinemasochism, Cineprov, Doug Benson's Movie Interruptions, Master Pancake Theater, Movie Masochists, and Riff Raff Theater, in addition to dozens of creative amateurs who share their riffing talents online at the RiffTrax-hosted iRiffs forum and elsewhere online. As a cultural critique, riffing's rise in popularity as ritual performance compels me to wonder if some of *MST3K*'s cultural appeal is related not only to style but to discursive function. I believe the influence of *MST3K* is related to the notion of audience agency.

On one level, *MST3K* is built upon a fantastic dramatic premise. Its principle characters—humans Joel Robinson (Hodgson), later Mike Nelson, and robot sidekicks Tom Servo and Crow T. Robot—are trapped in space aboard the Satellite of Love (SoL) and forced to watch “cheesy” movies (as per *MST3K*'s theme song) on implied penalty of death as part of a mad scientist's experiment to pacify the world with one perfectly awful film. Joel/Mike and the ‘Bots endure films that range from merely mediocre to historically execrable by *riffing* their way through each film: ridiculing its shortcomings with rapid-fire commentary. But *MST3K* is more than a single cultural text to analyze for its own sake. On an allegorical level, I suggest *MST3K* can also be read as a metaphorical representation of both the possibilities and constraints of appropriating and reading pop culture texts. Joel/Mike and the ‘Bots are subjected to films against their will, only to riff their way through them (with varying degrees of whimsy and ease) thanks to their pop sensibilities; within the context of the show, they survive and transform mediated experiences with creative reading tactics. Each episode of *MST3K* is a dramatization of both the possibilities for resisting pop culture texts and the constraints placed upon the reader.

While *MST3K* has been the subject of considerable news media and increasing scholarly discourse, I am unsatisfied with the amount of attention paid to how the show's riffing functions rhetorically in relation to the texts riffed by the show's characters—ethnomethodologically, we know how riffing looks and sounds but know less about what makes it work (and hinders it from working) as a discursive tactic. With 197 episodes and one feature film, there is no shortage of text produced by *MST3K* with which to approach this gap in knowledge. In this essay, I undertake a close textual reading of *MST3K*'s characteristic movie riffing and consider the show as a dramatic representation of these possibilities and constraints. Each episode of *MST3K* serves as a dramatization of, in Burkean language, *equipment for living* (1937, 296), of both the possibilities for riffing as a tool for talking back to pop culture and the challenges faced by the reader who attempts to do so. *MST3K* offers rhetorical tactics that can be utilized to aid in a motivated riffer's ongoing efforts to make sense of and potentially challenge ideologically loaded texts. Yet at times, the discourse created by the show also showcases problematic attitudes that can be read as destructive or offensive in ways that suggest ridiculing a text is

not necessarily the same as subverting it. If *MST3K* is an allegory for our lives as postmodern text readers, it is wise to look to the show for what to do and what not to do as oppositionally minded readers.

This essay is organized as follows: I begin by discussing different theoretical conceptions of ways in which audiences make sense of mediated texts; my literature review suggests critics disagree on how much sense-making agency audiences possess. I follow this by discussing key components of *MST3K* as a text, including its formal conventions and characters. I then explain my data pool and methodological protocols, which guided my close reading. Finally, I discuss key themes which emerged from my reading of eleven *MST3K* episodes, exploring ways in which riffing can be understood as a text-reading ethic which offers hope and/or draws concern over possibilities for oppositional reading (Hall 1980) of ideologically loaded texts.

The Theoretical Debate: Audience Agency and the Debate on Textual Polysemy

The history of scholarly discourse on audience agency features significantly disparate opinions on audiences' capacities to actively make sense of mediated texts, effectively creating a theoretical continuum on which media consumers range from helpless, homogenous sheep to tactically ambitious culture jammers. The earliest discourses on film subjugate the audience to the power of the medium. Among the earliest enduring anecdotes of audiences' relationship to film is the legend of audiences' terrified reaction to the Lumière brothers' 1895 short film *Arrival of a Train at the Station*²: according to legend, audience members screamed and ran for their lives out of fear that a train was truly rolling into the room. As Tom Gunning notes, the image of turn-of-the-century French audiences fleeing in terror out of the inability to distinguish a real train from a filmed train has been trotted out over the years to support the notion that audiences are generally naive and that they passively and uncritically consume mediated messages.³

Writing from the Frankfurt School critical perspective, which conceives of messages channeled through mainstream media as necessarily bound to reinforcing the dominant culture, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno grant popular culture, including film, the power to overwhelm subjugated audiences: “The sound film, far surpassing the theatre of illusion, leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience... [Films] are so designed that quickness, powers of observation, and experience are undeniably needed to apprehend them at all; yet sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts” (1972, 126-127). Here, the combination of the Culture Industry and film's power as a medium grants the reader little capacity for comprehending or resisting the ideological content of the text bearing down upon him or her.

Cultural Studies scholars such as Fiske, Hall, Jenkins, and Janice Radway grant significantly more power to audiences, suggesting that texts are *polysemic* and that

by filtering pop culture through their own experiences and politics, readers are poised to make and remake texts in ways that satisfy their own appetites. With this turn, film no longer inevitably overwhelms the hapless reader but assumes a more malleable form that can be appropriated—tactically “poached” from its original purpose, in de Certeau’s terminology—and potentially used for purposes both political and pleasurable. This situates the reader at the forefront of the meaning-making process, which becomes kinetic and takes on the potential for liberatory practices.

Fiske explicitly resists granting audiences absolute power to control the meaning of texts: “This polysemic potential is neither boundless nor structureless.... Polysemy is always bounded and structured, for polysemy is the textual equivalent of social difference and diversity” (1987, 16). Still, Condit critiques Fiske and Radway for overreaching, suggesting they “oversimplify the pleasures experienced by audience members.”⁴ As many of the pre-eminent scholars in critical audience studies themselves admit, audiences are not free to make meanings at will from mass-mediated texts” (1999, 494). As an alternative to the *polysemous* text, Condit offers the concept of *polyvalence*: “when audience members share understandings of the denotation of a text but disagree about the valuation of those denotations to such a degree that they produce notably different interpretations” (497). If two persons with conflicting political beliefs or positionalities read the same text, they will read the connotative meaning of that text in ways inexorably enabled and constrained by their identities and experiences. Mediated texts are theoretically open to reader interpretation but in reality are open only insofar as the reader is rhetorically equipped to make sense of them.

For this study, I embrace the term *polyvalence* over *polysemy* for the former’s explicit foregrounding of conflict in text reading, though I do not read Fiske’s tempered use of *polysemy* as problematically as Condit seems to suggest. With either term, the pertinent issue is that the imbalance of cultural capital in pop culture is distributed disproportionately: neoliberal, bourgeoisie, white, heteronormative, masculine discourses dominate mainstream media. Film is no exception: Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner note individualism (self-reliance, distrust of government), capitalism (competition, upward mobility, social Darwinism), patriarchy, and racism as common Hollywood themes noted by radical critics (1998, 1). The cultural consumer who identifies with a hegemonic normative worldview (i.e., those characteristics noted above) enjoys easier access to mediated pleasure and worldview reification; the consumer who exists at odds with the culturally dominant has his or her identity attacked at every nearly turn in the marketplace of mainstream media—which, as discussed earlier, is increasingly the primary conduit by which social reality can be accessed in the postmodern age.

Making meaning out of a cultural text always requires work on the part of the reader—because texts are polyvalent, this work is intensified for readers who do not identify with dominant texts—and this work should not be taken

for granted or sublimated to text-authorship. There is no such thing as passively reading a text. Roland Barthes notes that reading “is a form of work” and “is not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing which we endow with all the glamour of creation and anteriority” (1974, 10). Whether aligned with or against the political status quo in a particular instance, readers make sense of mediated messages through a *decoding* process: translating the symbolic content *encoded* into the text into ideas translatable to everyday life. Hall identifies three positions from which readers decode mediated messages: *dominant-hegemonic*, *negotiated*, and *oppositional* (1980, 171-173). The dominant-hegemonic reader “accepts the dominant codes bestowed upon the text by producers and reads the hegemonic message accordingly” (171). The oppositional reader understands both the denotation and connotation of the discourse but rejects the latter, opting instead to reflexively “retotalize the message within some alternate framework or references” (173). The negotiated reader operates between these two poles, accepting the premise of the dominant-hegemonic norm but modifying it to better fit into her or his worldview. Dominant readings require the reader merely to identify with the text in ways that reify his or her worldview; conversely, oppositional reading requires the reader to re-historicize and denaturalize the dominant discourses embedded in the text while supplying her or his own counter-discourses for points of identification and refutation.

Hall’s encoding/decoding model has been critiqued as missing many of the subtle nuances of postmodern media consumption. Among the critiques levied against Hall’s encoding/decoding model are arguments that (1) we cannot assume class is unitary and all readings cleanly fall into Hall’s three categories; (2) not all cultural texts reinforce dominant ideologies; and (3) to suggest readers read oppositionally implies they understand the preferred meaning (Staiger 2005, 83). Although Hall’s categories remain useful guides in thinking about pop culture reading as a site of sense-making, we should not assume that readers always consciously choose sides and read purposefully. I suggest the task of gathering and making sense of textual and discursive fragments can be completed with varying degrees of competency, which presents the possibility that readers can develop skills for oppositional reading. I suggest, in theory, the more skilled the oppositional reader in the art of achieving coherence with gathered textual fragments, the greater his or her capacity for denaturalizing myth in hegemonic texts.

What can a television show featuring wisecracking robot puppets and cheesy movies teach us about the possibilities and perils of oppositional reading? I suggest *MST3K* is a culturally relevant text because it is equipment for reading *other* mediated texts. To draw again from Kenneth Burke, the show’s model of movie riffing functions as a *representative anecdote* (1966) for everyday reading of mediated texts in ways that are, to the reader, heuristic and/or pleasurable in ways not explicitly supplied by the text.

The Text: *Mystery Science Theater 3000*

While characters and side-plots in *MST3K* came and went—the show rarely featured a traditional narrative arc that spanned more than a single episode—the basic format of the show remained constant: Servo, Crow, and Joel/Mike are forced to watch a bad movie selected by their captors as part of Dr. Forrester's ongoing search for a film painful enough to break the SoL crew's will; Dr. Forrester (later, his mother, Pearl, took over as chief antagonist) planned to unleash that film upon the world's population as a tool of domination. But rather than enduring the experiment in silent agony, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots riffed their way through the film as a defense mechanism against its offensive nature. Although they occasionally encountered a film so wretched they emerged from the theater in tears and sobs, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots never cracked as intended by their captors, and more often than not they skewered the film with relative ease and returned from the theater in good spirits and as sharp-tongued as ever. Despite being exposed to the worst that the vast cesspool of pop culture could muster (within the show's universe, at least), the SoL crew's text-reading skills were always enough for them to emerge victorious. Cumulatively, their voices were always more powerful and resourceful than any text they encountered. If we were all so fortunate, media literacy would not be an issue.

I read the recurring dramatic premise of *MST3K* allegorically: as U.S. pop culture consumers, we are all faced with a barrage of mediated messages on a daily basis. Our mediated reality is ideologically loaded and requires that we exercise our abilities to read and at times resist the poisonous messages we encounter. *MST3K* suggests that mediated reality can poison our minds and weaken our bodies if we fail to resist—Dr. Forrester represents the Culture Industry that uses the power of mediated spectacle to distract us from forces that exert power over us. Joel/Mike and the 'Bots, in this allegory, represent the powers and the necessity of media literacy: of savvy tactical discourse and oppositional reading skills that empower us as readers not only to resist oppressive dominant discourses but to also communicate to one another alternate possibilities for being. Joel/Mike and the 'Bots do what they do better than Dr. Forrester, and thus they endure and improve; at the end of the series they outwit their captors (and one last movie), break captivity, and return to Earth, where they continue to watch the same cheesy movies they always have but do so by their own volition: the final scene of the final episode depicts Mike and the 'Bots willingly sitting together to watch and riff *The Crawling Eye*, the same film featured in the first episode of the series' syndicated history. They never escape mediated reality (because there is no unmediated reality to return to), but they become fully realized as empowered readers of pop culture.

As equipment for living, then, *MST3K* invites its media-inundated audience to embrace the challenge of oppositional reading and thus to challenge the Culture Industry of mediated hegemony. This task should not be taken for granted: we are not free to simply synthesize or

conjure any meaning we choose from any text. But before concluding that *MST3K* is an empowering, subversive text, a paradigm of text-reading prowess, it is vital to study its model of riffing not as an abstract concept (it is not a simple *doing* that produces *nothing*) but as context-specific webs of utterances with political implications. Riffing is both a recognizable mode of discourse—there exists a set of behaviors associated with riffing—and every time one riffs, one produces performative language that does something in specific interplay with the texts one references. The latter, I argue, is overdue for scholarly inquiry.

With this in mind, I argue that what *MST3K* (and, by extension, any discourse produced in the act of riffing or embodied audiencing ritual) says at the micro level is too important to ignore for what is too often assumed (or, perhaps, even hoped) it does at the macro level, lest we make the false assumption that riffing as a performance technique is independent of the discourse it produces. With this in mind, I turn my attention to the discourses produced by *MST3K*'s riffing to better understand precisely what rhetorical tactics the show employed, and how the repetition of these acts interacts with the films they riffed.

Data Gathering and Analysis

In an effort to better understand *MST3K*'s movie riffing as equipment for tactical text reading, I offer a close reading of eleven episodes, one from each season (beginning with "Season 0" on public access KTMA and extending through seasons 1 through 10). The episodes in my data pool were selected based on a fan rating system (zero to five stars) on the official *Mystery Science Theater 3000 Information Club* website (www.mst3kinfo.com); each selected episode was rated highest in its respective season by site users as of March 21, 2012. Selected episodes include (listed by episode number and featured film): "K20: *The Last Chase*," "110: *Robot Holocaust*," "212: *Godzilla vs. Megalon*," "312: *Gamera vs. Giron*," "424: *Manos: The Hands of Fate*," "521: *Santa Claus*," "604: *Zombie Nightmare*," "703: *Deathstalker and the Warriors From Hell*," "820: *Space Mutiny*," "904: *Werewolf*," and "1002: *Girl in Gold Boots*." By selecting popular episodes across the show's history, I hope to capture a cross-section of the show's most resonant efforts within the riffing community. That said, my experiences with the other 187 episodes of *MST3K* suggest I could have selected any other eleven episodes across the show's trajectory and would have detected similar, though not identical, themes.

My data gathering process entails watching each selected episode multiple times and taking note of discursive patterns and rhetorical tactics that stand out to me as disrupting the film's narrative or that encourage me as a reader to read the film differently than I would without Joel/Mike and the Bots' commentary. In other words, I focus on the more political aspects of *MST3K*'s discourse: the speech acts that communicate attitudes and ideologies with implications greater in scale than the immediate signifier, particularly those that compel me to accept those values and integrate them into my worldview mov-

ing forward. Here, it is important that I re-foreground my cultural positionality: as a white, Midwestern, middle-class male, my identity markers are generally similar to those of *MST3K*'s writers and cast, as well as the overwhelming majority of the show's fan base. As such, and as a long-time aficionado of *MST3K*, I find myself easily identifying with the show's characters and patterns of rhetoric, making it easier to personally derive pleasure from the show and negotiate its forays into dangerous discourse in ways that do not sour my esteem of the show and its performers.

The next step in my process involves drawing out recurring themes across my data. I attempt to study the show from as grounded a position as possible. Although I deliberately resist making specific connections to episodes not featured in my data pool, I am unable to totally shut out my experiences with the other 187 episodes of *MST3K*, and thus my reading of these eleven episodes is subjective and does not coalesce in a vacuum. This affirms Keith Grant-Davie's argument that data coding, even from a grounded perspective, "is always shaped by what the researcher is looking for" (1992, 273). By looking for certain rhetorical elements within *MST3K*'s discursive field, those which can be understood as potential tactics for oppositional reading or those which illuminate the opportunities and/or constraints of reading polyvalent texts, I inevitably missed others, some of which I hope to return in future essays.

Riffing Tactics: Declustering Symbols and Animating Mythologies

Within *MST3K*'s fictitious universe, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots rely on tactical riffing to refuse the agony intended by Dr. Forrester's ongoing parade of bad movies. While the premise that a bad movie could dominate the world is absurd (as it is no doubt intended to be), in the *MST3K* universe the pain inflicted by bad movies represents the Frankfurt School's concerns over the Culture Industry's power of dominance cranked up to ludicrous volume. But just as *MST3K*'s premise is an over-the-top dramatization of real-life concerns about media's potential for the mass communication of oppressive discourses, the show's iconic riffing can be understood as symbolic equipment for competently reading and subverting the power of those texts. Reading a polyvalent text is an act of negotiation: the reader crafts her or his own reading through the lens of the text's constructed reality and attempts to reconcile the two in ways that may or may not be accessible through the text alone.

The rhetorical tactics employed by Joel/Mike and the 'Bots empower them to read film in ways that not only stave off subjugation but also constitute a heuristic vocabulary that expands over time: with each film riffed, the rifiers have more points of reference upon which to draw when a new exigency emerges. Of good criticism, Barry Brummett writes, "Theory and method need to explicate this example, this object of study, but they also need to explicate the next example, to teach us how to understand the next rhetorical event that comes along"

(2003, 366). Joel/Mike and the 'Bots answer this call by riffing in ways that not only aid them in reading the text at hand but also in approaching future texts. Text reading (particularly oppositional reading, which requires more work) is a skill that builds with practice; hence, riffing can and should be epistemic and should communicate ideas that are useful in other situations. Joel/Mike and the 'Bots' demonstrated talent for invoking texts past and present, high- and low-brow, iconic and obscure, presents them to the at-home audience as ideal rifiers and oppositional readers: their resolve may occasionally waiver, but they never allow themselves to fall under the spell of any text that is hazardous to their wellbeing. Their journey into space and back is an upward trajectory of text-reading competence.

An exhaustive teasing-out of *MST3K*'s rhetorical themes, along with a structural representation of the relationships between riffs and the film's textual elements with which they correspond, could easily fill several hundred pages. My primary aim in this essay, however, is not to pass judgment on *MST3K* but rather to identify discursive tactics which can be transplanted from the show's fantastic fictional universe and practiced by everyday rifiers and/or oppositionally minded readers of cultural texts who strive to employ riffing for political purposes in addition to entertainment or *MST3K* mimesis. That said, discourse matters, and the language produced by *MST3K*'s rifiers cannot be cleanly disentangled from their tactics.

The overarching discursive tactic across the sampled eleven episodes is the isolation and magnification of troublesome elements of the film-as-text. Put another way, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots appropriate the text's symbolic clusters (which are assembled by the text's producers in ways that appeal to the reader as coherent and sovereign) but manipulate, mangle and make strange the most vulnerable elements (those which do not blend seamlessly into the film's artificial reality) until the text is warped beyond any capacity to fulfill its author-intended symbolic message. The end result of this systematic declustering is a completely new audiencing experience, one that more closely fills the audiencing desires of the rifiers. As Ora McWilliams and Joshua Richardson observe, "Once a film has been viewed in a riffed condition... it is often permanently altered in the viewer's mind" (2011, 115). The work of Joel/Mike and the 'Bots, can never be undone or un-experienced; for the audience, the film does not revert to its unriffed state after the end credits. This does not mean riffing a film injects permanent, static meaning in the reader's mind, either—new texts and new experiences mean no text is ever permanently closed—but after experiencing the riffing of a film, the reader will not experience the film as she or he did pre-riff, even if she or he chooses to reject the rhetoric of the riffer(s).

Over the course of these eleven episodes, five more context-specific recurring rhetorical themes emerge, which I argue should be understood as avenues by which polyvalent texts can be declustered and their ideological content denaturalized in ways that favor the possibility of oppositional reading. These recurring riffing tactics include:

(1) *Shades of Gray as Hierarchical/Archetypical Subversion*: Films position their audiences in ideological vantage points; they call upon audiences to accept their articulations of reality and privilege particular characters as vessels for identification. When reading traditional narratives affirmatively, the reader identifies with the protagonist and shuns the antagonist, taking pleasure in Good's triumph over Evil and seizing salient elements of the hero's path to victory as equipment for living. In all eleven episodes, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots refuse this call to identification by introducing shades of gray into the text's structural portrayals of Good and Evil, thereby effectively challenging the film's preferred points of identifications and sources of equipment for living.

Through riffing, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots resist identification with perfectly good protagonists by rhetorically superimposing sinister motivations. In *Gamera vs. Guiron*, the lovable police officer Kondo (whose name Joel and the 'Bots purposefully mishear as "Cornjob" in response to incomprehensible dubbing—another common riffing tactic) is framed by Joel as "the goofy twisted man Mom said we [the child protagonists] shouldn't talk to," implying the film's only compassionate authority figure actually endangers the children he is supposed to protect. Santa Claus's joyous laughter, an iconic aural symbol of joy and giving, is made dark and covetous when Mike follows with a maniacal "I will rule the world!" Santa's legendary watching of all the Earth's children takes on similarly ominous tones when Crow riffs: "Increasingly paranoid, Santa's surveillance hinders everyday operations," suggesting either that Santa abuses his power of surveillance or employs it for purposes other than bringing toys to good boys and girls.

Inversely, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots make buffoonish clowns of evil characters, thus resisting alignment against what was intended to be perfect evil. In *Robot Holocaust*, a villainous crab-like monster is humorously dubbed "Crabby" and a "Crustafarian" who "would taste good with drawn butter," thereby severely undercutting the character's menace. In *Godzilla vs. Megalon*, Crow portrays the giant monster Megalon's gyrations to those of a Vaudevillian performer, chiding the audience to see his show, implying that the creature's destruction of inhabited space is an act of entertainment; later, the film's climactic battle between the good duo of Godzilla and Jet Jaguar and the evil duo of Megalon and Gigan is narrated by Joel and the 'Bots as if it were a mid-80s World Wrestling Federation tag team match. In *Zombie Nightmare*, Mike and the 'Bots resist performing outrage over a psychopathic teen killer and would-be rapist, and instead repeatedly ridicule and belittle him, often when he is at the precipice of violent antisocial behavior—for example, during a trivial scene in which he childishly throws cooked spaghetti at his mother. Through riffing, villains against whom we are supposed to align become laughable, just as the heroes with whom we are supposed to align get similar treatment. The intended vessels of identification are stripped of their full capacity to contain our admiration or loathing. The hierarchi-

cal structure of Good versus Evil becomes symbolically muddled; identification becomes blurred, and traditional narratives become more difficult to accept. This breakdown of mythologies becomes useful when reading problematic films such as *The Last Chase* and *Space Mutiny*, which offer violent, neoliberal everymen as heroes.

(2) *Introducing the Mundane into the Fantastic, and Vice Versa*: Commercial films assert the rules of engagement through cinematic devices including narrative framing. Some films are dark and urgent (e.g., *Robot Holocaust*, *Manos*, *Space Mutiny*) while others are light and fun (*Godzilla vs. Megalon*, *Gamera vs. Guiron*, *Santa Claus*). *MST3K* adopts a contradictory stance whatever the occasion, alternately lowering the stakes of dire films and raising the stakes of lighthearted fare in ways that complement their aforementioned tactic of inverting the motivations of the characters that drive their respective plots.

Domesticization and introduction of the mundane play key roles in the riffing of *Manos*: the film's pseudo-Satanic lodge is riffed as if it were an unremarkable motel, complete with swimming pool and magic fingers; the satyr-esque caretaker Torgo (perhaps *MST3K*'s most prominently manufactured riffed icon) is treated not as a sinister Satanic henchman but an incompetent, sexually frustrated bellhop. When *Manos*'s cranky protagonist asks to stay at Torgo's lodge with his doomed family, Joel explains Torgo's reticence to allow him to stay with the absurd riff, "Look, we have a convention in town, I'm sorry," even though there is obviously no town or fellow guests. Servo further clips Torgo of his menace: "I'll have to run it [staying at the lodge] by my sales manager." In *The Last Chase*, the SoL crew riffs a long shot of writhing, suffering masses of a postapocalyptic dystopia with an extended Beatlemania metaphor; if riffing induces us to laugh at the film's attempts to portray mass human suffering, how can we invest in the film's "one man against the shadowy government" tale of rugged neoliberal triumph? In *Robot Holocaust*, a post-apocalyptic drama, Joel pulls a similar trick when he scoffs at the film's low-budget portrayal of dystopia: "I think it looks like a roller coaster, like Six Flags Over Armageddon." During the climactic fistfight of *Girl in Gold Boots*, Servo and Mike's biggest concern is fear that a fallen antagonist might get hair grease on the pool table. At the times when these films call upon their readers to feel sorrow or tension while being drawn further into the film's fantastic universe, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots' lower the stakes by evoking images to guide the audience back into the dregs of desensitized triviality.

Conversely, *MST3K*'s riffing uses morbid frame changing to introduce the sinister into the ostensibly benign. After Crow's humanizing of *Godzilla vs. Megalon*'s titular antagonist in an aforementioned earlier scene, Joel continues to modulate the film's mood, this time toward the darker, when he connects the iconography of the film's white-clad Seatopian dancers to the Ku Klux Klan; extending the metaphor and further tinkering with the mood, Crow breezily riffs: "Now that Twyla Tharp has joined the Klan, Anna Kisselgoff [*New York Times* dance critic]

will give them a good review.” Continuing the children-in-mortal danger motif of *Gamera vs. Guiron*, Servo narrates horrifying lyrics over the film’s whimsical soundtrack, singing: “Let’s watch the kids go to their fate / They’ll disappear into the woods / It will be days until they’re found / Cornjob will be blamed.” The sum effect of such frame-changing, in these examples achieved through a variety of means including the manipulation of narrative elements such as visual imagery and music, is the further disruption of identification and the hindrance of the text’s capacity to sediment, to be read as coherent or familiar. Such riffing works to keep the reader in a liminal space and foregrounds the text’s inherent state of instability and malleability. When a text cannot satisfy the audience’s desire for coherence and pleasure, audience members are free to venture elsewhere, to roam outside the inadequate elements provided by the text for those very purposes.

(3) *Illuminating the Artificiality of the Medium*: Ryan and Kellner note that pop culture texts, specifically films, “impose on the audience a certain position or point of view, and the formal conventions occlude this positioning by erasing the signs of cinematic artificiality” (1998, 1). Joel/Mike and the ‘Bots frequently use riffing to draw attention to the flaws and seams in the film construction process in ways that work to draw the viewer out of the film’s universe. For example, in *The Last Chase*, Joel chastises the film by questioning how, in a dystopian future in which the government has taken away all cars, our hero (a former racecar driver escaping in his old car) is able to readily access nitro-burning gas at an apparently abandoned gas station. In *Robot Holocaust*, Servo refuses to suspend his disbelief and contradicts the film’s dystopian landscape: “I guess it’s a wasteland if you ignore that city behind them.” Later, Joel says, “If I was skeptical, I would say that’s Central Park.” Joel and Crow point out the use of day-for-night lighting (a common technique in low-budget filmmaking) in *Godzilla vs. Megalon*; Joel notes “it must be a blue moon tonight.” In *Space Mutiny*, Mike and the ‘Bots find extended humor in a continuity slip in which a character who was killed in a previous scene sits unharmed at her workstation in the next (Mike: “alright, look alive everyone—oh, sorry”).

On the surface, these riffs come across as simple ridicule, the kinds of obvious commentary that does not resonate beyond a dismissive critique of the text itself. Given that they do not require a high degree of rhetorical complexity or intimate knowledge of the text, I am not surprised to find that jokes such as these are most common in amateur and improvised riffing. But riffing on flaws in the text’s iconography should not be dismissed as lesser riffing because it works to keep the seams of the text construction process visible. Keeping the text-construction process visible serves to remind viewers about how texts do not occur naturally but are always assembled and done so with purpose, varying degrees of skill, and care. Also, calling attention to the elements of construction, particularly when it does so at the expense of embracing more privileged elements of the text, such as plot or character,

encourages the reader to stay vigilant and keep questioning the elements by which the text has been assembled.

(4) *Historicizing Familiar Faces*: With the exception of sequels, prequels, and remakes, films are constructed to draw audiences into a complete, coherent, self-sufficient universe; one can argue that sequels and prequels do so even more, as they demand that the reader remain even more immersed by situating the events on-screen in ways that are consistent with other installations of the story. For the most part, commercial film of the U.S. provides audiences with the dramatic elements (characters, setting, plot, etc.) and pieces together the elements of narrative and visual imagery into a complete, coherent, and pleasing text. As cultural texts, films construct and provide their own histories through dramatic conventions; the mythologies and tropes upon which they draw are repackaged and presented as something new and vital.

MST3K pierces this veil of self-sufficiency by introducing competing histories into the narrative, and the conduit for these histories is often a famous (or infamous) actor. To varying degrees, Joel/Mike and the ‘Bots saddle familiar actors with stigmas of past (or future), more well-known works, effectively adding layers of history and discourse to the narrative. One of the earliest episodes, *The Last Chase*, stars Lee Majors and Burgess Meredith; the former is noted by Servo for having been in *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *The Fall Guy*; the latter’s history in the *Rocky* films is evoked when Servo rhetorically ponders, “Doesn’t he have boxers to train?” Later in the show’s trajectory, Joel/Mike and the ‘Bots embrace this evocation of ancillary texts as an artistic choice. For example, Adam West’s villainous role in *Zombie Nightmare* evokes numerous unflattering Batman references. Mike and the ‘Bots make the creative choice to portray West not as brave and heroic but as washed-up, drunk, and deeply bitter over not having been cast in Tim Burton’s *Batman* film; here, the rifiers demonstrate multiple layers of interpretive agency in choosing not only which textual threads to introduce into the fray but which elements of those threads to emphasize. *Werewolf* briefly features Joe Estevez (brother of Martin Sheen, uncle of Charlie Sheen and Emilio Estevez), who is mocked for being a lesser member of his family despite his considerable filmography. Although Estevez plays only a small role and his character disappears early in the film, the evocation of his more famous family members draws disproportionate attention to his character. Estevez is a fine and prolific actor, but the rifiers punish him for who he *is not*, implying that the producers of *Werewolf* were too cheap to obtain the services of Martin, Charlie, or Emilio. The ridicule of Joe Estevez, in the context of riffing *Werewolf*, represents not a condemnation of his career but of the film’s limitations and shortcomings.

When there is no celebrity actor present, Joel/Mike and the ‘Bots create their own simulacra of celebrity, often noting physical resemblances to celebrities and accordingly superimposing *their* ad hoc histories into the narrative. Through this wordplay-by-association, riffing improbably transplants facsimiles of David Lee Roth

and Emmett Kelly into *Robot Holocaust*; Oscar Wilde and Tim Conway (specifically, Conway in his persona of incompetent athlete Dorf) into *Godzilla vs. Megalon*; and Richard Burton and Ernest Borgnine into *Gamera vs. Guiron* (Servo notes Borgnine's resemblance to Gamera, the friendly flying monster-turtle). Joel even reflexively notes their tendency to employ this tactic in *Gamera vs. Guiron*, performing "another skit based on a character's weak resemblance to a Hollywood star"—even Joel and the 'Bots acknowledge they are stretching by burdening one of the film's child protagonists with Burton's likeness and legendary affinity for alcohol consumption.

Introducing celebrity histories, even if by simulacra, allows Joel/Mike and the 'Bots to introduce competing text fragments into the text's narrative structure. As Jenkins notes of this fragment-gathering practice, "The reader is drawn not into the pre-constituted world of the fiction but rather into a world she has created from the textual materials. Here, the reader's pre-established values are at least as important as those preferred by the narrative system" (1992, 63). This poaching from other texts, often more beloved and well-known texts, keeps the reader at the fore of the text-assembly process. Given the fact *MST3K* rarely features films for which iconic actors are best remembered, the process of evoking more visible texts also functions to undercut the epic posturing of the text at hand. This kind of riffing privileges media literacy: the more one is familiar with a performer's work, the more potential threads one can draw into the text at hand.

(5) *Audience Agency Through Idiosyncrasy*: Keeping Jenkins's argument that poaching empowers the reader, *MST3K*'s riffers at times reject a strict signification system by occasionally interjecting idiosyncratic riffs whose presence is less concerned with exposing or declustering specific symbols in the film and more about simply expressing the riffers' attitude toward a particular phenomenon. In *MST3K*, this frequently results in a negative outburst, as a riffer may go out of his way to put down a text or text producer he dislikes. During the ending credits of *The Last Chase*, Crow notes that the film was produced in Canada and says "that explains why it sucked" without elaborating on why he equates Canada with inferior cinema. A nondescript piano tune in *Gamera vs. Guiron* evokes dread from Servo: "Oh no, it's a Mark Russell song, run!" A song in *Manos* again draws Servo's ire: "Yuck, it sounds like Jerry Reed." In both of the latter examples, the symbolic connection to the musicians disparaged is tentative; the point of both riffs is to put down Russell/Reed rather than to comment on the soundtrack's role in the film.

Such references need not be negative, though, as there are instances in which Joel/Mike and the 'Bots reference a beloved text or performer with tenuous signification to an element of the film. For example, *Godzilla vs. Megalon* includes a recurring reference to an obscure motorcycle-themed television show *Then Came Bronson*: the otherwise forgotten television program was frequently, almost reflexively, evoked in motorcycle scenes across *MST3K*'s early history, though there any number of more widely

accessible texts featuring motorcycle culture. Beloved avant-garde musician Frank Zappa is referenced in both *Gamera vs. Guiron* and *Manos*. While these are not full-fledged floating signifiers, they do reflect an earnest interjection of the reader's idiosyncratic tastes into the reading process. As I discuss in the following section, the impressive array of reading tactics and fragments gathered and introduced into the text structure is largely dependent on the *intertextual* chops of the reader.

Opening Texts Through Intertextuality

Upon receiving its Peabody Award, *MST3K* was cited as "an ingenious eclectic series" that references "everything from Proust to *Gilligan's Island*" (qtd. in Holtzclaw 2010, 181). This noted ability to draw on a wide base of external references—applying them in specific contexts to alter the reading of a particular text—is another way to note *MST3K*'s *intertextuality*. As McWilliams and Richardson note, *MST3K*'s "[e]xterior references situate the program in the center of a web of texts, interrelating it to the entire history of popular culture" (2011, 114). In the annals of television history, no program has even been more overtly reliant on drawing on an eclectic array of references to *other* pop culture texts to derive sense from its premise, and this shared talent among the show's characters stands out as a key tool in their survival kit.

Consider, for example, *Deathstalker* (a fantasy adventure set in medieval times), in which Mike and the 'Bots reference: Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who*; Men Without Hats' music video for "The Safety Dance"; *American Gladiators*; the Oakland Raiders; the marriage of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton; *Lord of the Rings*; *The Sound of Music*; prop comic Carrot Top; *The McLaughlin Group*; *Oliver Twist*; tennis player Bjorn Borg; Ike and Tina Turner; Mother Teresa; Bill Clinton; *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*; *Starsky & Hutch*; *The Simpsons*; Christian metal band Stryper; Luciano Pavarotti; the Gutenberg Bible; the video game *DOOM*; David Hasselhoff; *Ladies Home Journal*; *Jesus Christ Superstar*; Barabbas; and NAFTA—to name perhaps a third of the show's external references. They spend at least as much, if not more, of the film talking about other texts as they spend talking about the text in front of them; in doing so, they simultaneously talk about both the text present and others present-by-proxy.

For another example, *Werewolf* (a film which evokes the American Southwestern legend of the yanaglanchi, a lycanthrope-esque skinwalker) includes references to: *Billy Jack*; the Marshall Tucker Band; *Curious George*; the *Mir* space station; *Walker: Texas Ranger*; Chia Pets; *The English Patient*; *Cheers*; Bruce Jenner; Bob Vila; Janet Reno; *Taxi Driver*; Fidel Castro; *The Sheltering Sky*; Robert Bork; *The Pirates of Penzance*; Neil Young; St. Paul of the *New Testament*; Son of Sam; Frank Zappa; *The X-Files*; Pearl Jam; *Great Expectations*; Jackson Browne; Bob Dylan; Johann Sebastian Bach; *Hustler Magazine*; J.D. Salinger; *Guernica*; neurologist Oliver Sacks; and Jimmy Carter—again, this is only a sample of the external references evoked in a single episode. Somewhat incredibly, most of these refer-

ences are deployed with purpose and in ways that relate to elements of the film (as opposed to the idiosyncratic pseudo-floating signifiers discussed earlier). There is no denying that the discourse produced on *MST3K* is built on an impressively vast knowledge of popular culture.

While *MST3K* draws liberally on external references (as demonstrated at length above), the show is also noteworthy for its internal references, also known as *callbacks*, in which the show's characters reference riffs and characters from past episodes. In addition to serving to both constitute a form of series continuity and reward repeat viewers, callbacks help to make *MST3K*'s intertextual mode of discourse coherent in ways that a hopelessly eclectic intertextuality cannot achieve. They establish iconic characters and lines of dialogue into riffing's heuristic vocabulary, which would otherwise be forgotten. Without the necessary textual fluency, internal references become indecipherable codes that exclude participation. But by so frequently harnessing both external and internal intertextuality—a literacy that consistently mushroomed as the show went on—*MST3K* speaks about culture to virtually the same degree it speaks about the text at hand.

Discussion: Perspective by Incongruity or Dominant-Hegemonic Reification?

It is misleading to suggest *MST3K* contradicts or subverts the films they riff, at least in a sense that *MST3K*'s riffing constitutes an overt oppositional reading of their films. Rather, it is more accurate to say that *MST3K* challenges the meaning of its targeted films through *perspective by incongruity*. Burke, likening its practice to “verbal atom cracking” (1937, 308), explains perspective by incongruity as “a constant juxtaposition of incongruous words, attaching to some name a qualifying epithet which had heretofore gone with a different order of names” (1935, 90). Teresa Anne Demo suggests perspective by incongruity can be used as a tactic by which comedy can be employed for political action, noting the “highly charged nature of the symbolic alchemy produced when differing rhetorical/ideological orientations mix” (139). “Verbal atom-cracking” is indeed an apt metaphor for *MST3K*'s brand of rhetorically alchemic perspective by incongruity.

Rather than directly denouncing the film's problematic content, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots often temporarily co-opt the film's problematic attitudes and rhetorically magnify them to such a degree that an earnest dominant-hegemonic reading becomes laughably absurd. Articulated another way, rather than standing overtly in opposition of the film and its ideologies, Joel/Mike and the 'Bots often *over*-perform a dominant-hegemonic reading, effectively cracking the atoms of the film's message together so brashly that the ideologies undergirding the film collapse.

And yet, the challenges brought on by textual polyvalence reemerge here: whether the reader decodes the show's over-the-top abrasive riffs as perspective by incongruity—critique masquerading as ignorance—or simple reification of hegemonic discourses—ignorance masquerading as critique—depends mightily on the reader, as well

as the rhetorical artistry with which the rifiers assemble their over-the-top performance. The ways readers move through the world, coupled with their relationships to the texts involved, open a large possibility of the show being decoded as reinforcing the problematic ideologies of the films being riffed or even spreading discourse more ethically toxic than those of the films.

MST3K's riffing at times can be read as abrasive and destructive. At times it is denotatively racist, sexist, nationalistic, sizeist, ableist, homophobic, or generally cruel enough to dissuade identification with the rifiers if one is not pre-inclined toward such identification. For example, Joel and the 'Bots attack the lead child protagonist in *Godzilla vs. Megalon*, Roku (dubbed “Roxa” in the English version and deliberately misheard as “Roxanne” by the SoL crew), who is riffed harshly for his squeaky dubbed voice. The rifiers order Roku to “shut up” frequently, and Joel even urges Roku to ride his bike into traffic; when Roku bemoans the fact that his caregiver cannot use the heroic robot Jet Jaguar to summon Godzilla to help fight Megalon (which eventually does happen), Crow complains, “it's a pity we can't kill you [Roku] and get away with it.” When *Santa Claus* begins with a procession of crudely racist stereotypes of children working in Santa's workshop (e.g., sombreros and ponchos for Mexican children, bone jewelry and tribal paint for African children, turbans and bindis for Indian children), Crow joins in and (over?)performs racism with malicious glee: he notes that kids from France “stink to high heaven,” and English children “have rotten teeth,” later half-heartedly attempting to atone for his racism by dismissing kids from the United States as “too spoiled and lazy to help Santa.” To their credit, Mike and Servo are outwardly offended by Crow's behavior, suggesting the at-home audience ought to feel the same. In *Space Mutiny*, Servo describes a woman serving drinks at a party as follows: “Yes, she's a graduate of MIT, yet she still has to serve drinks to men” and delivers the line with a disturbing tone of satisfaction that would be hard to dismiss if not already invested in the Servo character (as well as Murphy, who operates Servo). To laugh at cruel riffs such as these, to read them as not offensive but rather as indicative of an incongruent over-identification with the film's offensive attitudes, it is at times necessary to have developed a positive relationship and a trust with *MST3K*'s characters or to actually identify with their utterances.

The rhetoric of *MST3K*'s movie riffing, while frequently cited as progressive for its age and medium, is still littered with utterances that reflect problematic dominant-hegemonic ideals. The show is articulate and literate in comparison to most any television program of any era, but still reads as white, midwestern, male, heteronormative, middle class, and at least foregrounds (though does not necessarily promote explicitly) Judeo-Christian discourses. It is remarkable and telling that even the vaunted masters of movie riffing, whose demonstrated collective intertextuality is arguably unmatched in breadth and depth in the annals of U.S. television, are still clearly constrained by their positionalities to the point that the show is remark-

ably more accessible to White Straight Midwestern Male audiences, myself included, than any other. This is not to suggest that the makers of *MST3K* purposefully privilege White Straight Midwestern Male audiences but merely to note that it is not coincidental that the positionalities of the show's cast of writers match the demographics of a majority of their audience.

My reading of *MST3K*'s characteristic rhetoric does not indicate direct hostility toward identity groups who do not fit the demographics of the show's cast, and yet it seems the artists who craft that rhetoric cannot help but project a degree of insensitivity in their utterances that I understand to be disinviting to readers whose identities and experiences do not correspond with their own. I suggest this is striking evidence of Condit's critique of the notion of the polysemous text: sophisticated intertextual reading does render a text more open than an insular reading, but *MST3K* suggests that even skilled, politically motivated readers cannot escape the constraints of their own identities. To be truly intertextual in a way that can use comedy as a method to challenge hegemonic discourses, readers must actively verse themselves in texts that contradict or challenge their own conceptions of reality.

Conclusion

It is certainly debatable whether *MST3K* is itself an oppositional text, or even if the show's articulation of reality constitutes a welcome voice in the lexicon of popular culture. Michael Dean argues, "Even if the riffing done by the *MST3K* host aims largely for laughter rather than a specific political or historical critique, its willingness to violate the sanctity of a movie's frame and challenge the movie's terms of engagement can be seen as setting an empowering example for all audiences" (121). While this may be true, audience empowerment does not necessarily imply oppositional reading or even a socially responsible reading. The empowered riffer may or may not communicate ethically and may or may not empower others through their performance. If, in popular usage, *MST3K* empowers amateur rifiers to pollute the air with racist, sexist, and other hateful discourses that are just as problematic and oppressive as those of the films they riff, that empowerment to speak has not been for the social or cultural betterment of the audience. On the tongues of the ignorant and hateful, *MST3K* threatens to become, in everyday practice, a tool for distributing destructive rhetoric, and this should not be.

MST3K demonstrates that polyvalent texts can be at least partially declustered by skills such as intertextuality and tactical rhetoric, and these concepts as media literacy tools ought to be recognized as important skills that are worthy of both theoretical and practical development within the academy. As scholars and media consumers, we ought to recognize that students and scholars of popular culture can and should conceive of media literacy as a cluster of skills that can be built and expanded with intention. In theory, consumers of popular culture can work to become more intertextually fluent, more acutely aware of how producers construct texts and imbue them with ideology, and more aware of how those constructions can be dismantled. I hope this suggestion will not be misinterpreted as being too naïve to disparities in access to mediated reality or to the fact that performative riffing is not the only method by which we can interpret and work against problematic pop culture texts. As cultural critics, we ought to continue to study how hegemonic discourses within popular media can be denaturalized and potentially opposed, but we should also remember that we cannot completely escape our own frames of reality from the texts that surround us. One prime lesson to glean from *MST3K* is that even bottomless intertextuality from a single cultural positionality will fail to account for the experiences of others. By entering into earnest dialogue between Self and Other, critics within and outside of the academy can work toward a communal heuristic vocabulary that is capable of promoting oppositional reading practices that can be put into everyday use. Through continual dialogue, we can engage with voices both within and outside our own cultures.

END NOTES

1. I am basing my arguments and assumptions upon my experiences and interpretations as a U.S.-born, middle-class white man. While not all U.S. populations enjoy equal access to technology and thus to mediated reality, one of the principle assumptions of cultural studies scholarship is the ubiquity and constitutive nature of commercial media.
2. Full English title: *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*. Translated from the original French: *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*.
3. Gunning questions the factual legitimacy of the *Arrival of a Train at the Station* legend and suggests that early film audiences willingly suspended their disbelief in exchange for the thrill of the illusion: "The audience's sense of shock comes less from a naive belief that they are threatened by an actual locomotive than from an unbelievable visual transformation occurring before their eyes, parallel to the greatest wonders of the magic theatre" (1995, 119).
4. In both cited texts, Fiske and Condit write primarily about television and not as often about commercial film. As the ways in which films and television programs change and, perhaps more importantly, as films are increasingly viewed in the home rather than in commercial theaters, distinctions between how we audience film and how we audience TV continue to blur.

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