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Deep Surfaces: Advancing the Interpretative Analysis of Television News

Abstract

Recently, the focus of the study of news has shifted from information to the meanings news stories produce. Hitherto the interpretative analysis of television news has, however, tended to neglect the prominent role that interaction between verbals and visuals as well as the story structure have in the meaning production of TV news. That they occupy a key position in this respect is shown in this article through re-analysis of two earlier studies and through scrutinization of a news story aired by the Finnish Broadcasting Company in 1991 on the situation in Cuba. The article concludes with discussion of how meanings extracted from a news story are rooted in cultural common sense, and suggests that analysis of meanings in news amounts to the study of our cultural unconsciousness.

Introduction

The analysis of what meanings are produced by literary works and by what means represents one of the most honored and prosperous approaches within literary criticism. Also within cinema and film studies, inquiry into filmic meanings and meaning-construction is well advanced. Within media studies, in contrast, the situation is different. Traditionally, it has been exceptional to ask: what meanings do mass mediated texts of this or that kind produce and in which way? This applies in particular to the study of news and other so-called factual texts.

There are certain obvious reasons for this. The most important has been the long-lived separation between fact and fiction; the great divide of texts into factual and fictitious, into texts being related in some way to reality and texts being products of creative imagination. Jakobson's (1960) communicative functions aptly crystallize this difference: the referential function is foregrounded in factual, the poetic one in fictitious texts. Based on this divide, it has been commonplace to think that factual texts are – or at least should be – relatively unambiguous whereas the fictitious ones tend to be multilayered and polysemous. Therefore, they are in need of a specific interpretation while the factual ones are not, at least not to the same extent or in the same sense.