The Construction of Cultural Identities in the Context of Global Communication: The Simpsons Go to Brazil

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Abstract

Global media corporations play an important role in the production, reproduction, and spread of representations of events, places, and social groups through media texts. In the United States, the known development and influence of Hollywood film industry as well as television networks are good examples of how the internationalization of American media works, especially since the process of globalization has been intensified around the world. On the one hand, the importing of *Americanized* media products by developing countries can be seen as a relatively cheaper way to solve problems of limited resources for media production. On the other hand, even considering the various possibilities of interpretation of the messages these media texts convey, it is important to take into account the fact that for many people the media are the only and the more "reliable" source of information about the world. Additionally, because the media provide the audiences with representation of social reality, their identities and the identities of "others," are, to a certain extent, shaped by the media. Then, how do the identities of peoples, cultures or nation-states can be defined within a process of globalization which is carried out with unequal levels of participation/power? Based on that, this study takes the episode "Blame it on Lisa" (Bendetson & Moore, 2002) of Fox Networks television series *The Simpsons* as an example, and aims to discuss how the representations of Brazil depicted on this specific episode contributes to the reinforcement of a distorting and generalizing image of the country. In doing so, this study intends to approach this research question utilizing the main points of intersection between cultural studies and political economy theory.

Keywords: Representation; Cultural identity; The Simpsons; Brazil; Global communication

Introduction

Carnival, samba, soccer, Rio de Janeiro, Amazon rainforest... These are the likely words one might get when asking an ordinary person about Brazil. If this person is a man, he will probably add the word 'women.' Indeed, Brazil is mostly known as a place where one can enjoy diverse cultural manifestations and exotic and abundant natural resources, such as beaches, rivers, forests, and so on. These attractions make hundreds of tourists go there to appreciate them. By doing so, they have the opportunity to have a better understanding of the country as whole, but it is undeniable the fact that the view they get from this kind of immersion is still a limited one. Nevertheless, the majority of the people get most stereotypes from the media, as these representations are frequently reproduced by the most powerful media industries around the world.

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Due to their effective resources for the production and distribution of media messages or texts, Global media corporations or media conglomerates play an important role in the production, reproduction, and spread of representations of events, places, and social and cultural groups through the media. In the United States, the known development and influence of Hollywood film industry as well as television networks are good examples of how the internationalization of American media works, especially since the process of globalization has been intensified around the world. On the one hand, the importing of *Americanized* media products by developing countries can be seen as a relatively cheaper way to solve problems of limited resources for media production. On the other hand, even considering the various possibilities of interpretation of the massages these media texts convey, it is important to take into account the fact that for many people the media are the only and the more "reliable" source of information about the world. Additionally, because the media provide the audiences with representation of social reality, their identities and the identities of "others," are to a certain extent shaped by the media. Then, how do the identities of peoples, cultures or nation-states can be defined within a process of globalization which is carried out with unequal levels of participation/power?

Departing from this question, this study takes the episode "Blame it on Lisa" (Bendetson & Moore, 2002) of Fox Networks television series *The Simpsons* as an example, and aims to discuss how the representations of Brazil depicted on this specific episode contributes to the reinforcement of a distorting and generalizing image of the country. In doing so, this study intends to approach this research question utilizing the main points of intersection between cultural studies and political economy theory.

Theoretical framework

Cultural studies is the approach that identifies the research and knowledge produced by the scholars from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham during the 1970s. Following some of the theoretical principles and analytical procedures of the Frankfurt School and, consequently, the Marxist thinking, the research in the Centre brought about some changes in the then research practice, which was mainly influenced by the American empirical social science. One of the Centre's founders and one of its most prominent intellectuals, Stuart Hall (1980a) presents at least four aspects that describe this shift.

Initially, the Centre replaced the behavioral approach, which focused on the influential character of the media (media effects), by a perspective interested in the analysis of the ideological role of the media (Hall, 1980a). In opposition to that earlier quantitative-oriented tradition, the qualitative research of the Centre defined media as "a major cultural and ideological force, standing in a dominant position with respect to the way in which social relations and political problems were defined and the production and transformation of popular ideologies in the audiences addressed" (Hall, 1980a, p. 117).

This redefinition of media as an influencing institution determined by ideological forces at play in society led the group to the second aspect of their work in the Centre, which had to do with the notion of

media texts. Considering their meaningful construction, media texts required an analysis which helped to understand their "linguistic and ideological structuration" (Hall, 1980a, p. 118).

The conception of audience was the third aspect with which the Centre challenged the earlier research traditions. From an idea of a passive and homogeneous group of receivers and mostly associated with the notion of "mass society," the audience gained a more active status and later was also seen as interpretive communities given the fact they were conceived as heterogeneous groups of decoders (Fish, 1979, quoted in Jensen, 2002b, p. 167). Culturalists, then, were more concerned with how media messages were produced (encoded) in contrast with their actual moment of interpretation (decodings) by their diverse audiences (Hall, 1980a, p. 118).

The fourth aspect stressed the relationship between media and ideology. The main question was to determine how "media play in the circulation and securing of *dominant* [hegemonic] ideological definitions and representations" (Hall, 1980a, p. 118). The outcomes of the study of the interrelationship of these elements are crucial for the discussion this study is addressing. However, in order to better orient this inquiry it is necessary to examine how these elements are being approached to the concept of culture.

According to Jensen, (2002a, p. 173), culture can be seen as "reproduced, cumulated, and sedimented structures of meaning." Additionally, Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts (1980, p. 10) define it as "the way, the forms, in which groups 'handle' the raw material of their social and material existence." In this perspective, nation-states can be defined as different cultures as they have their specific identities framed by their languages, histories, social codes, and so on (Jensen, 2002a). Thus, in terms of nationality, one's cultural identity gives him/her the sense of belonging or unity even though the structure of a national culture is based on difference (Hall, 1992).

From these points, the present study assumes the economic and political relation among nation-states in terms of how these structural connections influence or determine the ideological aspects of the production and distribution of media messages and the way their identities are constructed in this process. For instance, some scholars discuss that the asymmetric economic and political relation between nation-states can reinforce the cultural imperialism from ones over others (Schiller, 1971; Becker, Hedebro, & Paldán, 1986; McQuail, 2000; Berger, 2003; Jensen, 2002a). This phenomenon is certainly one of the explanations for the imposing of ideologies which may result in a cultural homogenization and loss of traces that define the different identities. On the other hand, more vulnerable participants of the ideological game of international communication can contest dominant or hegemonic ideologies, by creating their own messages and speaking by themselves. But even considering this possibility, the shortage of resources for the circulation of messages would limit their spread inside and outside of their frontiers. Thus, any attempt to analyze the international media organization must also come from the understanding of the economic and political elements that influence the relation among nation-states.

One of the possible approaches for the analysis of these interrelated elements is the political economy theory, which "identifies a socially critical approach that focuses primarily on the relation between the economic structure and dynamics of media industries and the ideological content of media" (McQuail, 2000, p. 82). In other words, by focusing on power relationships, "It is interested in seeing how the making and taking of meaning is shaped at every level by the structured asymmetries in social relations." (Golding, & Murdock, 2000, p. 73). These definitions lead to the assumption that representation is one of the ways dominant ideologies operate to construct identities through the media. But how does this process work?

To answer this question it is necessary to reflect on the definition of ideology. According to Stuart Hall (2003, p. 89), ideology is related to "those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand, and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence." Another aspect concerning ideology has to do with the fact that culture, whether in national or international levels, embrace different and concurrent ideologies. Because relations of power create asymmetries among the ideologies in play, they will be defined in terms of dominance and subordination. In other words, "…when one culture gains ascendancy over the other, and when the subordinate culture *experiences* itself in terms prescribed by the dominant culture, then the dominant culture has also become the basis of a dominant ideology" (Clarke et al, 1980, p. 12).

In cultural studies this idea of ideological dominance has been associated with Gramsci's concept of hegemony (as cited in Lull, 2003). Within it, representation operates as one of the main ways of social control. According to Hall (1982, p. 64), "It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, structuring and shaping: not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning, but the more active labour of *making things mean.*" He then defines representation as the way the media give meaning (re-present) to social reality (Hall, 2002).

Inasmuch as the things depicted on the media have no fixed meaning, the media work in the consolidation or fixation of determined meanings or stereotypes associated with certain groups or cultures. Nevertheless, by providing alternative meanings, contesting stereotypes work in the opposing direction, by reinforcing diversity in the media (Hall, 2002). However, this latter possibility is more likely to take place through the action of alternative media or small media companies, which compete with fewer resources for the production and distribution of media texts than the well established media conglomerates, which are mostly located in most developed countries.

At least two conclusions can be drawn from the points discussed so far. First, the way in which nation-states (in the sense of different cultures) are organized politically and economically is an influencing or decisive factor for the way they are constantly represented on the media. The availability of resources for the production and distribution play an important role in this process. Second, media messages reflect the principles or aspects that determine this structural organization. In this perspective, as it happens among different groups within society, the relationship among nation-states is also defined in terms of dominance and subordination. With this in mind, the next section of this study will be focused

on the analysis of the episode "Blame it on Lisa" (Bendetson & Moore, 2002) of Fox Networks television series *The Simpsons* in order to discuss how the representations of Brazil depicted on this episode contributes to the reinforcement of a distorting and generalizing image of the country.

Representation and stereotyping: the foreign eye

Strategically structured around the world, media giant corporations play a decisive role in the global communication. The political and economic influence of these companies has been criticized by many scholars and activists, especially the ones whose arguments are based on the Marxist thinking. Sharing the capitalist critiques of Marx or not, it is undeniable the fact that the economic and political power of these corporations is determinant for the way mediated communication takes place nowadays. Perhaps the most controversial topic of this discussion has to do with its impact on the field of culture. Although not conclusive, this study departs from the assumption that the interrelationship of political and economic structures has a direct influence to the way media messages are produced, by reproducing representations of the world based on hegemonic ideologies.

One of the most influent media corporations in the world, News Corporation, which includes all Fox production and distribution companies, works with all different kinds of media, such as film, television, print, music, and so on. *The Simpsons* is among its most well-known media products and due to its huge success with viewers in the United States and internationally, the show has been aired for more than 400 episodes (Rabinowitz, 2007). Despite its controversies in behavior and ironic tone, the depictions presented on the cartoon are a metaphor of an ordinary American family. In a complex set of discourses and representations, it also re-presents the way each of the characters deal with social and cultural issues.

The episode "Blame it on Lisa" (Bendetson & Moore, 2002) is about a trip in which the family goes to Brazil in order to find an orphan boy, Ronaldo, who had been supported by Lisa, Homer's daughter. The family had never been to Brazil, but they have got some information about it from travel brochures and other types of media. Some misconceptions about Brazil's culture are shown even before they actually board on the plane. For instance, Homer Simpson mentions that he heard on a movie that the kids in Brazil were "little Hitlers." Bart, Homer's son, decides to go to Brazil because he wanted to see the monkeys that scared Ronaldo on a record video. And despite the fact that they were in the United States of America, the boy and his family are happy because they are finally about to know all "continents," except to Antarctica. On the plane, Bart spends some time trying to learn Spanish, but is stopped as soon as his mother, Marge Simpson, tells him that people speak Portuguese in Brazil.

As the show goes on, the family starts to look for Ronaldo in a "touristic" slum. After being robbed by six kids, Homer and Bart take a "non-licensed" cab and the patriarch gets kidnapped. After that, he appears right in the middle of the Amazon River. Meanwhile, Marge and the kids are witnessing all the "immoralities" of the Brazilian carnival. In short, as Ronaldo gets paid for his work on the carnival parade, he gives it to Lisa for her to rescue her father. An allusion of the Brazilian family is made when Ronaldo

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says, 'Because I have no parents, my money remains unstolen.' At the end, after an accident with the cable car in the Loaf of Sugar in Rio de Janeiro, the family gets finally together. But the show is not over! The cartoon ends when Bart is swallowed by a huge snake and he simply yells from the snake's belly, 'Don't be sad, it is carnival!'

As can be implied from these descriptions, the stereotypes associated with Brazil are shown in a way that gives all the clues for the representation of the country as a whole and characteristics of its identity from an outsider's perspective. It is possible to see references of soccer, carnival, sexual liberalization, violence, Amazon rainforest, and so forth. Despite the fact that the many stereotypical images presented in the cartoon work for the fixation of the meanings they convey, as static caricatures of that social reality, it is important to interpret them also in comparison to their absent meanings (Hall, 2006). For instance, in the whole episode there is no reference of any social or historical context. However, other elements were purposefully selected in order to give a more accurate image of what is being re-presented. Ronaldo, for example, is the name of one of the most known Brazilian soccer players internationally. Overall, the cartoon demonstrates a profound ignorance about Brazil's geography and social issues.

In the ideological process of representation, the construction of identities seems to be one of the most efficient strategies for the control of power. The "other" is always depicted through marked stereotypes which are highlighted by linguistic (verbal/discursive) and imagery (visual) elements. As Hall (2006) lectured,

How necessary the other is to our own sense of identity. How even the dominant colonizing imperializing power only knows who and what it is and can only experience the pleasure of its own power of domination in and through the construction of another, of the other."

Additionally, mediated communication plays an important role for the perpetuation of ideological representations. Developed countries, as the United States, remain economically and politically powerful in comparison to other more vulnerable nations because they still own the most efficient means of production and distribution of media products. As a result, in the international arena, this fact defines which voices are heard, which stories are told, and, more importantly, how these stories are told.

Conclusion

This study discussed how political and economic structures defined internationally influence the identities of nation-states produced and distributed by media corporations. Based on the points of intersection between the political economy theory and cultural studies, this inquiry tried to understand how the representations of Brazil depicted on the episode "Blame it on Lisa" (Bendetson & Moore, 2002) of television series *The Simpsons* contributes for the reinforcement of a distorting and generalizing image of the country.

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As shown above, mechanisms of media representation can be considered as ways of power control, especially through the creation of identities. As media corporations located in the United States and other developed countries own the majority of the resources for the production and distribution of media products, their hegemonic ideologies shape the identity of "others" mostly from their own perspective. Even considering the relative freedom of media professionals, this problem still remains. As they work on behalf of what Stuart Hall (1980b) calls "dominant-hegemonic position" (p. 136),

[T]heir codes serve to reproduce hegemonic definitions specifically by *not overtly* biasing their operations in a dominant direction: ideological reproduction therefore takes place here inadvertently, unconsciously… [However,] conflicts, contradictions and even misunderstandings regularly arise between the dominant and the professional significations and the signifying agencies. (Hall, 1980b, p. 137)

If that is true, then how to determine the exact limit between the human being (professional) and the institution (media company)? To answer this question it is necessary to understand all the formative elements of our discursive practices, our values and everything that help us to define our identities. If our own identity is also determined from the reflection we get from the eyes of "others," making them appear more bizarre and strange also makes our self image worse.

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