Manufacturing Monsters Across Media and Genres: Towards an Interdisciplinary and Multi-Dimensional Research Agenda on the Cultural Construction of the Other

Holger Pötzsch, UiT Tromsø

Abstract

This theoretical chapter offers an integrated interdisciplinary model for the study of mediated cultural communication. Firstly, I describe the model and acknowledge preceding approaches that focused on similar issues. I show the intrinsic connections between aesthetic form, production, reception and reproduction, and argue for the necessity of studying all these components together to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex issues at hand. Secondly, I introduce philosophical underpinnings of an integrated interdisciplinary approach, highlight a series of methods applicable to each component, and argue for the importance of corelating data across alleged disciplinary divides. Finally, the chapter postulates the importance of such a comprehensive approach for a better understanding of, and resistance to, processes and practices of othering across media and genres.

Introduction

This contribution offers a template for the study of processes and dynamics of othering across media and genres. The purpose is to develop a multidimensional research agenda that highlights and interconnects components of contemporary mass cultural communication processes that are often treated separately in more limited approaches. To reach this aim, I present a model that shows the mutual interferences between 1) aesthetic form and encoded dominant ideological meaning potentials, 2) factors at the level of production (finance, labour, technology, discourse) that allow for an explanation of such ideological biases, 3) negotiations of these potentials in various situated contexts of reception, and 4) political, societal, economic, cultural, and other implications that reproduce these material frames and their ideological forms. In the following, I will firstly reference earlier approaches that have followed a similar agenda and attempted to see culture and media in a comprehensive manner, before I provide examples of key theories and methods applicable in each corner of the cultural production, reception, and reproduction model developed here (figure 1). Finally, I will offer guidelines for studies that attempt to understand practices and processes of othering from such integrated and multidimensional vantage points.
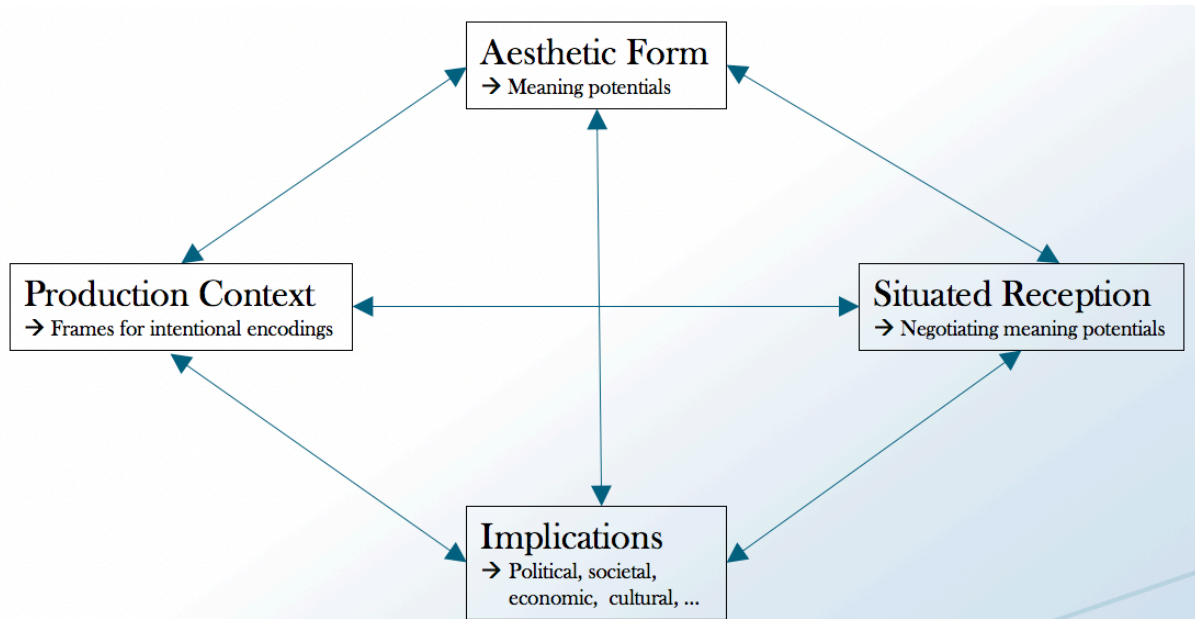
Fig. 1: The cultural production, reception, and reproduction model.

Earlier approaches

The idea of connecting aesthetic form, production, reception, and reproduction to enable a comprehensive understanding of the circulation and mediation of meaning in complex communication processes is not new. As I will show in this section, a series of scholars from a variety of disciplines have successfully made similar attempts before. Therefore, the present contribution is not so much concerned with developing an entirely new framework, but aims at bringing into dialogue with one another, showing commonalities between, and thereby integrating established theories and methods to facilitate interdisciplinary endeavors and build bridges across alleged scholarly divides.

Stuart Hall and the encoding/decoding model
Attempts to see cultural production from a vantage point that brings together material structures, power relations, and content need to acknowledge the contributions of the Birmingham School for Cultural Studies and in particular one of its key thinkers, Stuart Hall. Being one of the founding figures of the school, Hall has contributed widely to our understanding of cultural processes, issues of identity, and questions of hegemony, ideology, and racism (see for instance Hall 1980a, 1980b, 1986, and 1997). Being a Jamaican-born British Marxist, also his personal background might have sensitized him for the importance of material and embodied relations for such areas of critical inquiry as racial and class representation, gender biases, and media manipulation.

Hall played an important role in the rearticulation of the cultural sphere as more than an arena for elevating contemplation of works of high art. Culture is for Hall a field of power struggles between individuals and groups in the same way as politics or the economy. Indeed, following Gramsci's (1971) thoughts on hegemony, Hall assumed that these areas can only heuristically be divided and in reality constitute one complex whole. Arguing vehemently for the intrinsic value and polysemic nature of so-called mass culture that emerges as far more than mere means of ideological interpellation, Hall reinstituted the common spectator as a key component of communication processes. In showing that cultural products' ideological content is actively received and negotiated by audiences, he opened-up the field of cultural and communications studies for empirical analyses of reception practices granting limited forms of agency to spectators that were previously seen as slavishly bound by an inherently ideological mass media apparatus (see for instance Althusser 1971).

Hall's understanding of culture and communication as material arenas for complex struggles over meaning and identities is most clearly reflected in his text encoding/decoding that had initially been published in 1973 at the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies. In this intervention into communication theory, he develops a model that includes such material aspects as relations of production and available technologies and combines these with semiotics and practices of intentional encoding and decoding of mass mediated messages to explain the circulations of meaning in contemporary societies. According to Hall, which cultural products are produced is not the result of individual contemplation of an author or auteur film-maker. Rather, questions of investment, funding, and profit-expectations together with available technologies and established frames of meaning and practice predispose the aesthetic forms produced at any given moment in history. Aesthetic form, as such, emerges as a variable dependent upon other, material factors.

In addition, his model further explains that the intentionally encoded aesthetic form in itself does nothing more than offering potentials for meaning. Authorial power rapidly diminishes once it has been enshrined in a cultural expression and released into communication circuits. From then on, a multitude of possible audiences, each situated in specific contexts takes over and attempts to re-appropriate the message in correspondence with own interests. These contexts are at once material and cognitive combining elements of discourse with material power relations and technological possibilities. The resulting varieties of re-articulations of the original message in context feed back into the frames of production, thus constituting a complex feedback loop of cultural production and reproduction. The model is very comprehensive and has been widely adopted to studies of cultural expressions mediated as comic books (Brienza and Johnston 2016), television programmes (Hall 1973), film (Staiger 2005), as well as digital games and Internet-based communications (Shaw 2017).

Mieke Bal and cultural analysis
Mieke Bal has offered a different, yet equally comprehensive, framework for an understanding of cultural processes and practices. Being a founder of the interdisciplinary Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis, she has analyzed biblical motives of Italian renaissance painters and graffities under motorway-bridges and treated both

with the same care and sincerity. Thereby, she undercuts received distinctions between mass culture and high art in a manner not unlike Stuart Hall. In contrast to him, however, Bal adopts a very different philosophical vantage point that exchanges Marxist sociology with narratology, psychoanalysis, and art history (Bal 1996, 1999, 2001). Arguing for the necessity to deepen both methodological and theoretical foundations of interdisciplinary inquiries, she redeploys a series of concepts from studies of visual art and literature to new and unexpected objects. Using such "travelling concepts", she shows, requires stringency and rigidity in application as interdisciplinarity is too valuable to succumb to superficial misappropriation of profound concepts and ideas (Bal 2002).

Treating both classical paintings and graffities as "expositions, Bal (1999) argues for the necessity to embed cultural expressions in wider contexts than those determined by e.g. a picture frame. A focus on exposition implies the necessity to problematize, and indeed challenge, received boundaries that tacitly predispose what counts as (part of) a work, and what not. According to Bal, every analysis sets such a frame that then determines what can be seen and what is excluded as irrelevant or unimportant. The problem is that such frames are more often than not set in an implicit manner through mere imposition of certain limits as apparently logical or natural. Problematizing frames and showing how they predispose meaning is the venue of cultural analysis and the concept of exposition one way of pinpointing such processes and of connecting them with wider material contexts and settings.

The term exposition points to the fact, that any artwork is situated in a physical space and a social context and functions at a variety of registers that each entail their own dynamics and challenges (see also Paglen and Gach 2003). The act of exposing something entails implicit valuation by someone who deems a certain work important enough to be shown (or, as Bal writes with reference to graffiti, at least significant enough not to be removed). Exposing something implies inherently power-laden purpose that analysts need to tease out when trying to make sense of a work as more than a decontextualized play of signs.

Besides seeing cultural expressions as expositions and thus embedding them in contexts that are made explicit as frames for reception and study, cultural analysis also aims at enabling a first-to-second person discourse between analysist/spectators and work. For Bal (1996, 1999), what we can say *about* an artwork is often less interesting than what the object responds to our attempts. By talking *with* rather than *about* something, received subject-object distinctions can be problematized and made the explicit theme of studies rendering new and often unexpected insights. In problematizing human agency in such a manner and in opposing it to a constitutive non-human counterpart enables critical interrogations of power and assumed epistemological supremacy.

In her endeavors, Bal includes the social and spatial situatedness of art objects and spectators in her analyses to problematize the drawing of boundaries around allegedly clear-cut objects showing that the practices of framing in themselves are at once arbitrary, power-laden and have profound impacts upon what can be seen and what remains invisible and thereby foreclosed from re-articulation. In assigning agency to objects, she also problematizes assumed epistemological positions thus enabling a reflective questioning of the role and power of exposing agents, spectators, and cultural analysts alike.

The political economy of communication: From Frankfurt school to propaganda model
The so-called Frankfurter Schule was composed of a group of German sociologists working at the University of Frankfurt during the Weimar Republic (such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, or Walter Benjamin). Forced to flee Germany during the Nazi years, most of them continued their work in the United States before returning to their home country in the 1950s. Attempting to explain the brutality of among others the Nazi era with the gradual ascendance of an instrumental rationality and authoritarian subjectivity that were both presented as peculiar to the modern era, the school offered a deep-seated critique of capitalism, totalitarianism, consumerism, and the specific identities they foster (Horkheimer 2004 [1947]; Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1947]; Marcuse 1964).

Combining Marxist political economy with a psychoanalytical tradition emanating from Freud to enable a better understanding of base-superstructure dynamics and authoritarian and totalitarian subjectivity, the Frankfurt School also engaged with issues of aesthetics, art, and mass culture. Launching a staunch criticism of in particular the latter, scholars connected to the school described the capitalist culture industry as a conveyer of inherently ideological subject positions that draws a veil over the eyes of the masses and makes them accept relations of exploitation and oppression as natural givens and for the benefit of all. Art on the other hand, entails the potential to initiate critical reflection and introspection that enable a critical consciousness and progressive political practices.

In much of Frankfurt school thinking, the spectator of mass cultural products appears as if slavishly bound by an ideological apparatus of power that generates consent and drowns critical thought in shallow entertainment. Such a deemphasizing of agency on the side of mass audiences has been reiterated in later attempts to understand the political economy of cultural production. Dallas Smythe (2006 [1981]) for instance showed how capital accumulation and exploitation work in the cultural sector. He coined the term audience commodity to grasp how television networks use commercials to transform spectators' spare time into productive labour and how information on their preferences are monetized and turned into saleable products. Christian Fuchs (2012) has taken Smythe's approach as a point of departure to explain the production of the exploited prosumer commodity on commercial social media applications (see Hesmondhalgh (2013) for a thorough description of contemporary culture industries).

While the Frankfurt school and later attempts to understand the political economy of communications mostly focused on the reproduction corner of the model introduced above and showed how cultural expressions reinforce capitalist values and subjectivities, the propaganda model by Herman and Chomsky (2002) directed attention to how material factors on the side of production systematically filter the content that can emerge on commercial media channels. Predominantly focusing their attention on US news businesses, the model has since been applied to other countries, other technologies, as well as the cultural sector (Fuchs 2018; Alford 2011; Bockwoldt 2019; Pötzsch 2019; Krüger 2019; Hammar 2019b).

In the propaganda model, the core idea is that certain structures on the side of production predispose form and content of mediated communication in a hegemonic manner to produce cultural expression that foment consent rather that critique and thereby serve to stabilize an implicitly reified status quo. Identifying the five filters 1) size, ownership, and profit-orientation, 2) advertising and licensing, 3) sources and sourcing, 4) flak, and 5) anti-*ism they show how these interact to highlight certain issues in line with hegemonic interests while veiling alternatives perspectives (e.g. worthy versus unworthy victims). According to Herman and Chomsky, mass media are a monolithic construct that produces content serving the aims and purposes of those funding and controlling it. Their objective was to determine these structures and their impact on what is disseminated. As such, they explicitly exclude speculations as to how audiences deal with the filtered content or how this content eventually feeds back into the system from the frame of the analyses. Only implicitly drawing upon Herman and Chomsky's model, Lee Artz (2015) has extended focus to globalized commercial media production from a similar vantage point that also directs attention to ideologically biased content how this emerges from a capitalist production context.

Summing up
Even though the different paradigms briefly reviewed above in principle enable attention to all four corners of the cultural production, reception, and reproduction model, each of them puts specific emphasis on particular subject areas. As such, one could argue that the Birmingham school of cultural studies and Stuart Hall had made their most significant contributions to an understanding of reception as an active process of appropriation in context. Mieke Bal's cultural analysis on the other hand might be seen as most fully realizing its potentials in investigations of form and of aesthetic objects as active participants in communication processes. In re-assessing base-superstructure relations and asking for the socio-political effects of ideological interpellations via mass cultural products, the Frankfurt school seems to offer the most viable tools for understanding reproductive dynamics and feedback loops, while Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model is best suited to assess the significance of relations of production, ownership and other material factors for form and content of the disseminated cultural products. Figure 2 provides an overview over these heuristic designations.
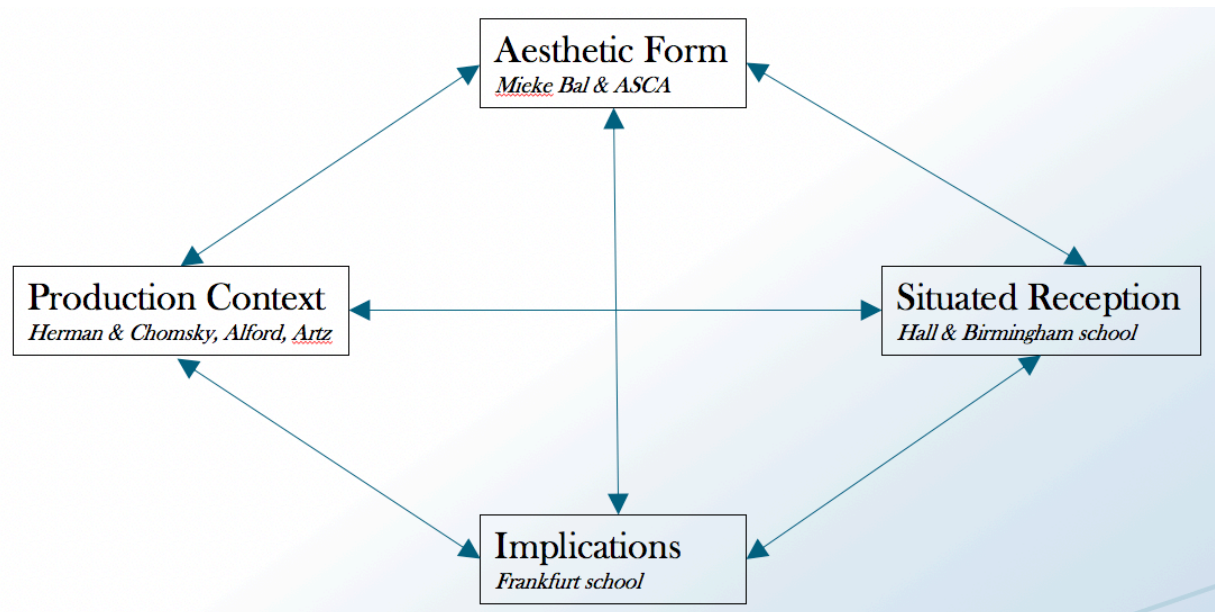
Fig. 2: Main emphases of the summarized approaches.

Designing a multiple methods framework

As the section above has hinted at, many well-established approaches have already attempted to grasp the complexities of cultural production, form, reception, and reproduction in context. However, most of them directed specific attention to only one or two of the model's four corners. This has very good reasons as it increases the focus and depths of the studies, but comes with the inevitable drawback of excluding salient aspects of actual cultural communication.

To conduct research with an interdisciplinary framework combining all four corners of the model, the methods deployed in each of them need to be first specified and then brought into productive and mutually beneficial dialogue. In project terms, this can be achieved through a three-step procedure that firstly conducts in-depths studies in each corner of the model generating data through application of methods specific to the discipline in case. In a second phase, the acquired data sets will be combined and corelated to identify instances of mutual confirmation or contradiction. These findings lead to stage three where data sets that do not match or point into different directions are reassessed to identify the reasons for the apparently contradictory findings and theories and methods are developed accordingly. By these means, aspects of a case invisible from one conceptual vantage point can be highlighted from another to bring forth new insights. For example, let us assume a formal analysis identifies a hegemonic potential of meaning that is systematically invited by a particular text. Empirical audience research then shows that most spectators do not activate these potentials but rather revert to oppositional readings. Taking results from the formal analysis as a departure point, a series of qualitative interviews might then attempt to make specific spectators reflect about their reading practices and offer answers as to why the dominant textual structures are subverted.

This form of interdisciplinary practice is inclusive. It attempts to combine different perspectives rather than choosing one above the other. Rather than engaging in often-fruitless academic trench warfare about whose methods offer the most exact picture of 'what is out there', interdisciplinarity accepts the ultimate contingency of the relation between observing subject and world. Rather than arguing about the object-as-such and the method supposedly offering the best or most accurate description of it, knowledge emerges as the constantly evolving and always only temporary result of complex negotiations in contingent terrain (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001). The question is not whether A or B is right, but what we can learn by asking why A sees what she sees and what makes B see something different entirely, and last but not least, what happens if we bring both perspectives together in an integrated approach.

To illustrate this point let us briefly consider the example of a map. The relation between a map and a territory is contingent. This means a certain map will highlight particular aspects of a landscape and de-emphasize others. A geological map might disregard mountain trails, roads, or bridges, but direct attention to different geological

formations, while a tour map, will do the opposite. Once someone hiking in the mountains draws up a geological map, the person will quickly meet the challenge of identifying the correct way to traverse difficult terrain or to cross waterways. These problems, of course, do not mean that the geological map is wrong. It just serves a different purpose that is defined by the frames of its production and should be highlighted to all possible users. The map is made for geologists, not for hikers. This logic applies not only to maps, but to all forms of articulation including scientific ones. Not one of them will ever be able to see the whole picture.

The difference between a relation of contingency and a relation of arbitrariness can be made clear once we think of someone drawing up a completely imaginary or deliberately faulty map. Once used in the terrain it allegedly refers to, there is no vantage point from which this map would makes any sense. The imaginary map, however, can still make viable arguments about the world, e.g. about the nature of representation as such, but it *cannot make a viable argument about the preceding physical territory*. In relation to this physical territory the imaginary or faulty map is arbitrary. It is therefore unsuitable for the purpose of hiking or studying geology and incapable of contributing with relevant new insights to those fields.

Different scientific methods offer widely distinct perspectives on the world. Just like different maps they are useful for some purposes and less useful for others. An integrated interdisciplinary project needs to carefully assess and address these different purposes, critically analyze these, and make them speak to, rather than argue against, one another. In terms of mediated cultural communication – its production, form, reception, and implications – a variety of disciplines and their specific methods can be applied and combined in this manner.

Let us begin with the issue of *aesthetic form* as it connects the important areas of production and reception. Aesthetic form can be studied empirically as sets of formal properties that have been configured with the intention[1] of conveying specific meaning(s). Once configured, however, the established structures are left at the whims of the receiver who can decode them 'correctly' (i.e. in the sense intended by the encoder(s)), but who can also appropriate them, bend them, misunderstand them, or bluntly disregard them (see for instance Hall 1973). The only thing a researcher looking at aesthetic form can identify are specific *meaning potentials* laid out by means of formal devices that systematically invite certain forms of reception.

The formal properties of cultural expressions constitute the empirical material of text-centric analyses. The means through which a novel, a film, a TV show, or a computer game invite certain meanings can be described, interpreted, and systematized, thus offering sets of possible readings, but they will never be able to objectively assess what a certain 'text' (in a wide sense) objectively means. Textual structures invite, motivate, demotivate, or make difficult. They function like systemic patterns of support and restraint that, with varying degrees of closure, predispose certain readings and make others more difficult, but they do not determine the receiver (Pötzsch 2013).

In terms of method, aesthetic objects can be examined through formalist methods, narratology, qualitative or quantitative content analyses, and more. The question if the identified meaning potentials are activated and realized, however, falls outside the purview of formal approaches and requires a set of empirical methods focusing on audiences and the issue of reception.

Questions of *reception*, i.e. how specific meaning potentials identified through formal analysis are activated, negotiated, opposed, misunderstood, or disregarded by concrete audiences in situated contexts requires a different set of methods to generate data sets that can subsequently be corelated with the results of formal analyses. The empirical social sciences offer a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods that can be used for such purposes (see e.g. Staiger 2005). From surveys with large groups to in-depth interviews with individuals, from automated eye-tracking technologies to auto-ethnographic approaches, from lab experiments to participant observation a wide array of techniques for the study of audience behavior and meaning-making practices is available. Main research interests are how receivers of mass mediated messages make sense of what is offered to them, how various contexts impact upon such practices, and how textual structures and devices interact during such processes.

Once sets of formal meaning potentials have been identified and their negotiations by situated audiences have been mapped, attention to the contexts of *production* can provide insights into the socio-political, economic, cultural, technological, and other frames that, overtly or tacitly, condition the emergence of such formal meaning potentials (Dyer-Witheford 1999; Alford 2010; Kerr 2017; Hammar 2019b). Studies of the political economy of the mass

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[1] For a thorough discussion of the problem of intention in textual analysis, see for instance Mitchell (2008).

media (focusing on issues such as ownership, funding, profit-orientation, regulations and more), production studies (combining surveys among producers, participant observation during production processes and in-depths interviews with practitioners, funding bodies, regulators and others), as well as studies of established genre conventions and available technologies can provide important data that allow for a better understanding of the material frames that predispose form and content of mass media products, and that entail and reproduce specific ideological biases.

For instance, the overt reliance of mainstream AAA videogames (that require budgets comparable to major Hollywood movies) on white male playable characters (inviting gender-biased meaning potentials) can be explained with reference to statistics showing a vast dominance of this segment of the population in production teams and targeted consumer groups (see for instance Bailey et al. 2019). Qualitative interviews among developers and producers can then examine how specific groups or individuals reflect upon and work with or against such inequalities, while participant observations might offer insights about how the perceived necessity to cater specific conventions and audiences for sake of profit might, or might not, translate into specific ideologically biased content. Alternatively, ethnographic methods can attempt to map the discursive and cultural environments from which certain products emerge and offer explanations for the chosen aesthetic form of specific products. By these means, formal meaning potentials and empirical reception practices can be brought into dialogue with methods that provide data explaining why a certain product looks as it does, which socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts its specific intentional design emerges from, and what material frames predispose the dominant meaning potentials enshrined in this form.

Finally, the level of *reproduction* enables attention to the various feedback loops that connect the formal meaning potentials emerging from specific production settings and their activation, negotiation, or subversion by concrete audiences in specific contexts of reception with attention to wider discursive and cultural frames that both condition and are conditioned by these practices. Here, Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory and critiques of hegemony can offer insights into how ideological biases are formed, naturalized, and reproduced, and how hegemonic interventions operate and frame wider socio-cultural dynamics. At this level, the power structures and settings that are shaped by and predispose activities at the levels of production and reception, and that are reflected in dominant aesthetic form, can be highlighted and subjected to critical scrutiny.

Two recent dissertations – Hammar (2019a) and de Smale (2019) – have applied an integrated framework to an analysis of memory-making functions of videogames and play. Both projects interrogated the interrelations between factors on the production side, aesthetic form, and practices of reception by players. In terms of methods they conducted qualitative interviews with developers and producers to assess the perceived frames predisposing the emergence of specific aesthetic forms and the historical meaning potentials these forms invite. The data was then corelated with player testimonies and the content of Let's play videos and user comments on social media to examine if and how potentials for historical meaning making enshrined in the game form were activated and disseminated further. This throws light on the important notion of circulation as key part of the reception corner of the cultural production, reception, and reproduction model (see also Dyer-Witheford 1999). De Smale and Hammar use the notions of cultural and media memory as a nexus connecting the identified practices back to processes of discursive and institutional reproduction. Both studies show the viability and concrete knowledge gains of interdisciplinary projects integrating perspectives on all four corners of the cultural communication model proposed here.

Manufacturing monsters across genres and media: A conclusion

Issues such as the ones discussed above do not only offer interesting new venues for the development of theories and methods, but also matter for questions of war and peace. As for instance James Der Derian (2002, 110) has pointed out, the cultural mediation of friends, foes, conflicts, and possible solutions are important ingredients of any war or peace effort. He writes that, "more than a rational calculation of interests takes us to war. People go to war because of how they see, perceive, picture, imagine and speak of others; that is, how they construct the difference of others as well as the sameness of themselves through representation". Arguing in a similar direction, Johan Galtung (1975, 81) has shown that direct violence – a physical exchange of punches or bullets – is only one and only the most palpable form of violence at play in conflicts. Underlying this type are structural forms such as systematic inequalities in access to vital resources, key decision makers, financial means, or the media. Underlying these, again, are cultural undercurrents that provide implicit legitimacy to such unjust conditions and that justify killing by framing certain groups or individuals as less than human. Cultural violence, and the value and norm

systems it implicitly naturalizes, is reproduced (and potentially challenged) in the mediated domains of societies and cultures. Therefore, these domains merit the continued critical attention of integrated interdisciplinary approaches that productively combine methods that address all dimensions of cultural communication in an integrated fashion.

Such comprehensive attempts to fathom the logics and dynamics that drive the media and cultural spheres are crucial for studies of peace and conflict. Only if we fully understand all the means through which certain actors create enemies and allies and provide justification for acts of war and military interventionism will we be able to adequately counter and object to these endeavors. *Manufacturing monsters* as Beyer et al. (2019) have termed this set of practices is a key aspect of war propaganda and war cultures everywhere and needs to be submitted to critical scrutiny from a variety of interlocking vantage points with an eye on facilitating change.

Key questions to be posed by critical inquiries into the multiple dimensions of othering across media and genres include issues such as received power structures and financial interests at the level of production – both military and otherwise. Drawing connections between ideological meaning potentials of specific aesthetic forms (such as the Hollywood war genre) and these interests, the influence of financing bodies and elites on media content can be mapped, before audience responses and their ideological and political directions are assessed that either activate and further disseminate this content or actively resist and attempt to suppress it.

An integrated interdisciplinary framework can generate and subsequently corelate data along all four axes of the model proposed in this contribution and this way contribute to in-depth understanding of the cultural dynamics and medial processes fueling contemporary conflicts and wars by conjuring up ever new enemies and monstrous others for the sake of justifying continued military spending, new security measures, as well as increased oppression and tighter controls of civil society. In-depths knowledge of the processes and dynamics of demonization and exclusion – the cultural components behind direct violence – can facilitate societal responses aimed at resisting and subverting constant pushes to war and help develop creative alternatives for nonviolent ways of encountering the various others any collective with necessity always will have to face. Peace does here not mean merely the absence of direct violence. Neither does it refer to a heavenly utopia and an end to all conflicts. Conflict is a necessary feature of life. In this respect, peace merely means the shared capacity to solve inevitable conflicts nonviolently and to treat our various adversaries not as threatening monsters but as partners in joint efforts to find solutions that are acceptable for all. Critical studies of the various dimensions of communication, media, and culture can support such crucial endeavors.

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Published as chapter 2 in:
Uzunoglu, Baybars & Yilmaz. 2023. *Discourses and Practices of Othering: Politics, Policy Making, and Media*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 8-24.

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