

Work Package 3: Investigating Interpretive Communities

A note at the beginning: when Matt, Ernest and Martin were sharing out responsibilities for keeping an eye on discussions of the various work packages, it turned out that all three of us declared a keen interest in this one. We all sensed that this concept is at a turning point within broad discussions within our fields, and could be one of the really important ones for the project as a whole.

BACKGROUND: We believe that the concept of 'interpretive communities' could be crucial to this project. But there are a number of things about it which make it difficult to know how exactly to make use of it within the project. Its roots are of course strictly theoretical, within German literary theory's tradition of *Rezeptionsaesthetik* (Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss). But via Stanley Fish (*Is There a Text in This Class?*) and then Janet Staiger (*Interpreting Films*), it made its way into the wider reaches of reception research, including film studies. Its value lies at least partly in its potential to provide a bridge between the very personal (idiosyncratic, autobiographically-located) aspects of audience responses, and concrete forms of social belonging. But as Kim Schrøder (in *Media, Culture & Society*, 1994) in particular has pointed out, when used in connection with researches into audiences, a series of very different meanings have been attached to the concept.

At least four broad meanings can be distinguished: 'interpretive community' can refer to:

- Real, living communities, with their networks, meetings, means of communication, hierarchies, leaders and so on;
- People with shared categorical characteristics (age, gender, 'race', sexual orientation, or etc);
- Learned orientations (transmitted by some formal or informal educative process);
- Powerful discursive regimes which transmit ways of thinking and talking about a topic.

A fifth meaning comes from a different theoretical source. This is the idea of 'imagined communities', which has its roots in the Benedict Anderson's re-theorisation of the nation. But since Anderson's work, the concept of 'imagined communities' has gradually been widened, to cover a range of phenomena (including some applications to media phenomena, such as affective communities or virtual/digital communities). Work on interpretive communities has also been especially significant in fan studies, where types of distinctive fan response have been linked to the concept, at least since Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*.

We think it is very important to be aware of the differences between these meanings, and in particular between the theoretical underpinnings of the 'interpretive' and 'imagined community' concepts. A very recent essay by Alexander Dhoest ('Imagined communities of television viewers', in Helen Bilandzic et al. (eds.), *The Social Use of Media*, Intellect, 2012) helpfully reviews a lot of the recent research around the concept, but in the course of doing seems to us rather to elide the differences between the two (Interpretive, imagined) concepts. If we are to design effectively our one or at most two questions to gather responses which can help us tackle this, we have to think about this at both theoretical and tactical levels.

Recently, another concept has emerged which perhaps feeds in to this set of issues. This is the concept of 'communities of practice' (Etienne Wenger). Wenger is particularly interested in the ways in which in work contexts people develop and share necessary knowledges, with associated

ways of talking, and systems for making evaluations and decisions. So, the emphasis in this tradition is on the languages and rules for behaviour which are produced within actual ongoing communities which have tasks to complete.

When we mounted the *Lord of the Rings* project, it didn't occur to us to include a question which might tap into interpretive communities. But despite this, sometimes people talked to us about this. This was particularly in their answers to our closing qualitative question which we had thought would address the personal/idiosyncratic aspects of people's responses: "Is there anything else that you would want to add that would help us understand your feelings about the film?". But often we found that people wanted to tell us about their sense of belonging to communities. For this reason, as well as for the more general reason of wanting to contribute empirical evidence to the ongoing debates around these concepts, we want to try to tap into people's sense of responding to *The Hobbit* as kinds of people.

How to do this? We can only afford to devote one – or perhaps at most two – questions to this. We have tried out various formulations, and want to put this to everyone in the network for discussion.

QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTIONS: To date, this has worked its way into the questionnaire through two question-forms that we have been toying with (and in each case, we have thought of the question coming at the very end of the questionnaire):

- a) Thank you for answering all our questions – we really appreciate it. We have one last one: when you think back over the answers you have just given us, what do you feel these should tell us about the *kind* of person you are, when you watch *The Hobbit*?
- b) Is there a kind of person who might share your views on the film? If there is, what do you think they are like (apart from just agreeing with you!)?

Questions to our colleagues:

1. Do you agree with the idea of trying to tackle this topic, and including such a question, or perhaps two?
2. How do you see the different theoretical traditions from which the concepts of 'interpretive communities' and 'imagined communities', and now 'communities of practice' come, in particular as these differences might have an effect on our question design?
3. Do you know of any working exemplars that we could learn from, of people who have attempted this in other questionnaires?
4. What thoughts do you have on the possible forms of question we have offered (above)? Do you have an alternative that we should consider? As well as kinds of people, should we also be considering interpretive communities as linked to kinds of responses which audiences will be self-consciously aware of generating, self-categorising, or participating in? Should we directly include in our question(s) reference to whether or how people felt a sense of belonging to particular audiences? What form of question might best achieve this?