

alan mckee



textual analysis

a beginner's guide

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

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A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

ALAN McKEE



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To John Hartley – who makes sense.

To Terry Pratchett – who makes me look like an amateur.

And to Marc – who makes martinis.

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What is textual analysis?

1

What is textual analysis?

Textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world. It is a methodology – a data-gathering process – for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live. Textual analysis is useful for researchers working in cultural studies, media studies, in mass communication, and perhaps even in sociology and philosophy.

Let's open with a straightforward description

What is textual analysis?

When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text.

We interpret texts (films, television programmes, magazines, advertisements, clothes, graffiti, and so on) in order to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them. And, importantly, by seeing the variety of ways in which it is possible to interpret reality, we also understand our own cultures better because we can start to see the limitations and advantages of our own sense-making practices.

Is that the only way to study texts?

Of course, I'm trying to make things simple here, and nothing is really that simple. This book only introduces one version of textual

analysis. Academics who do 'textual analysis' actually practise a huge range of methodologies – many of which are mutually contradictory and incompatible (for a sense of this range, see Allen, 1992). This book explains a form of 'textual analysis' whereby we attempt to understand the likely interpretations of texts made by people who consume them. This is not the only 'correct' methodology for gathering information about texts. Other approaches can also produce useful information: no approach tells us the 'truth' about a culture. It's important to realize that different methodologies will produce different kinds of information – even if they are used for analysing similar questions.

For example, suppose you were interested in what the responses of television viewers to an imported American programme (like the 1980s' soap opera *Dynasty*) have to tell us about how audiences make sense of the nation in which they live. You could try to find out this information in a number of ways. Professor Jostein Gripsrud includes two of these in his book *The Dynasty Years* (1995). On the one hand, Gripsrud draws on large-scale, numerical surveys about *Dynasty* viewers. He uses ratings information, for example, to tell us how many people watched the programme – finding out that in December 1988, 63 per cent of the women and 57 per cent of the men surveyed in his home country of Norway had seen at least one episode of *Dynasty* in the season that had just run. This is useful information – but it doesn't tell us anything about the *ways* in which viewers watch this programme. It doesn't tell us how they interpreted it, what they thought it was about, what relationship they thought it had to their own lives (Gripsrud, 1995: 113). Gripsrud goes on to investigate other issues in this large-scale survey, asking viewers what they disliked about the programme. He points out that less than 25 per cent of the people surveyed thought that the programme was 'unrealistic', for example. He uses this evidence to suggest that the viewers of the programme are likely to be relating it to their own life in some way (ibid.: 116).

But this methodology still doesn't produce any information about *how* these viewers might have been watching *Dynasty*. In order to produce large-scale, generalizable information, it is necessary to turn people into numbers. There's no other way to handle the information. So Gripsrud does this. He produces categories, and he fits people into them but this information doesn't give us any sense of how audience members actually use a programme. To produce that kind of information would require a different kind of approach, different kinds of questions – a quite different methodology.

Gripsrud quotes an interview with one viewer of *Dynasty*. The amount of detail and specificity about this one viewer is amazing compared with her status in the official ratings as a single unit:

[This *Dynasty* fan] is an intelligent bank employee in her thirties . . . her husband has a bit more education but . . . far less intelligence . . . her husband regularly beats her and humiliates her in various other ways . . . When telling the interviewer about her sexual misery, the wife on her own initiative started talking about *Dynasty* 'You know, I'm quite romantic, you see . . . What I like to watch on television is *Dynasty* . . . I dream that I'd like some tenderness and compassion.' (ibid.: 156)

In the methodology of large-scale surveys, processed as numbers, such a viewer becomes, perhaps, 0.1 per cent of the people who don't think that *Dynasty* is 'unrealistic'. Using that methodology, the similarity of her position to that of other viewers is emphasized. But in an interview like this, it is the *uniqueness* of her situation that becomes obvious – the individual ways in which her own life experience informs the use she makes of this television programme, and the interpretations she produces of it.

These two different methodologies produce quite different pictures of television viewers and their interpretative practices. This is because the questions that you ask have an effect on the information that you find. Different methodologies produce different kinds of answers.

This is an important point. There isn't one true answer to the question of how viewers watch this television programme. Depending on how you gather your information, you will find different answers. And you can't just fit these different pieces of information together like a jigsaw to produce the 'truth' about how viewers watch *Dynasty*. You can know in detail how a small number of people watch a programme; or you can know in a more abstract way how lots of people watch. But you can't really know both at once. If we simply interviewed every one of the millions of Norwegian *Dynasty* viewers in this way, we still wouldn't end up with a perfectly accurate picture of how they *really* interpret this text. Quite apart from the inconceivable cost of such a project, at some point it would be necessary to boil down the information, to look for patterns, to reduce viewers' experiences to the things that they have in common, in order to produce an account that wasn't twenty million words long. As soon as the information is boiled down into categories, it presents a different type of picture to that which emerges from the individual interview – but no less of a true one. Different methodologies produce different kinds of information – they might not even be compatible.

What is a text?

If textual analysis involves analysing texts, then – what exactly is a text? Answer: whenever we produce an *interpretation* of something's *meaning* – a book, television programme, film, magazine, T-shirt or kilt, piece of furniture or ornament – we treat it as a text. A text is something that we make meaning from.

So why not just say 'book' or 'film' or whatever?

We use the word 'text' because it has particular implications. There are no two exact synonyms in the English language – words always have slightly different meanings and connotations. The word 'text' has post-structuralist implications for thinking about the production of meaning.

And that would mean, exactly . . .?

Different cultures make sense of the world in very different ways. Times Books International publishes a series of books to help travellers visiting other countries. The series is called 'Culture Shock' (Craig, 1979; Hur and Hur, 1993; Roces and Roces, 1985). The books are not just tourist guides: they are attempts to help the visitor – as their title suggests – overcome 'culture shock': the experience of visiting another culture that's different not only in language, but in its whole way of making sense of the world. In their book on the Philippines, Alfredo and Grace Roces use this example to explain how different another culture's ways of making sense of the world can be:

After two years in the Philippines, Albert G Bradford, an American Peace Corps Volunteer wrote to one of his colleagues: 'I remember how quickly I discovered that people didn't understand me. The simplest things to me seemed not familiar to them at all. I tried to explain, but the further I got into an explanation, the sillier I looked; suddenly I felt undermined: the most basic premises, values and understandings were of no help to me . . . for these understandings and ways of doing and seeing things just didn't *exist* even. There was a big gap. (Roces and Roces, 1985: 83, emphasis in original)

Studying other cultures makes clear that, at many levels, the ways of making sense of the world employed can be quite different: 'The

Western visitor [to the Philippines] finds he is talking the same language, but not communicating at all . . . he [sic] is in an entirely different world' (ibid.: 1). These differences operate at a variety of levels, from the more superficial, to those which challenge our very foundations for thinking about what reality is and how it works.

Differences in value judgements

At the simplest level, cultures may ascribe different levels of value to things around them. For example, every culture includes people who have more body fat than others. But there is no universal agreement about whether having more body fat than your fellow citizens is a good thing or a bad thing. In Western countries a combination of medical and aesthetic discourses insist that being larger is not a good thing: it is neither attractive nor healthy, we are forever being told. We are constantly surrounded by reminders that this is the case, by people who might, for example, buy a T-shirt that says: 'No fat chicks' ('Enter a room/bar or event and let fat chicks know your [sic] not intrested [sic]', Shirtgod, 2002; luckily, you can avoid such people by wearing a T-shirt yourself that says: 'No morons who can't spell').

And such value judgements aren't natural, nor are they universal. In other cultures, completely different standards apply. In the African country of Niger, being larger is a positive quality and something to be sought after:

Fat is the beauty ideal for women in Niger, especially in the village of Maradi where they take steroids to gain bulk, pills to sharpen appetites and even ingest feed or vitamins meant for animals; many compete to become heaviest and train for beauty contests by gorging on food. (Onishi, 2001: 4)

The idea that different cultures make different value judgements about things is common sense – we already know this. But the differences in sense-making practices in various cultures go much further than this.

Differences in the existence of abstract things

In books about cross-cultural communication, you often find phrases like: 'it has not been possible to find satisfactory English translations for these expressions [of 'Hungarian politeness and greetings formulas and forms of address']' (Balazs, 1985: 163); or '[i]n the Hopi language . . . there is no word for "time"' (Fuglesang, 1982: 40).

Abstract nouns, describing things that don't have a physical existence, vary markedly from culture to culture. We can attempt to translate these from language to language, but these translations are often rough – trying to find the closest equivalents in a different sense-making system, but differing quite widely. 'Hiya' for example, is 'the foremost social value' in the Philippines, according to *Culture Shock*, and can be roughly translated as 'shame' but 'It is rather a difficult word to define', because the range and scope of this concept, and the variety of ways in which it functions in Filipino culture, have no equivalent in English:

It is a universal social sanction, creating a deep emotional realisation of having failed to live up to the standards of society . . . Filipino employees tend not to ask questions of a supervisor even if they are not quite sure what they should do, because of hiya; a host may spend more than he can afford for a party, driven by hiya; an employee dismissed from his job may react violently because of hiya. (Roces and Roces, 1985: 30)

Some cultures have no words for 'round', 'square' or 'triangular' (Fuglesang, 1982: 16) – these concepts aren't useful for their way of life. Others don't have words for, and don't use the concepts of, abstractions like 'speed' or 'matter' (Whorf, quoted in Fuglesang, 1982: 34). The way in which they make sense of the world is not built on these abstractions that are so familiar to Western culture. Anthropologist Fuglesang describes the culture of Swahili speakers in Africa, and the ways in which they make sense of the world without the abstract nouns that Westerners are used to. For example, the answer to the question: 'How big is your house?' is 'I have house for my ancestors, the wife, and God gave me eight children, Bwana'. With repeated questioning, it turns out that the house is 'fifteen paces'. When asked, 'How long is a pace?', the answer is: 'The headman, Mr Viyambo, does the pacing in the village, Bwana' (quoted in Fuglesang, 1982: 34). In the Western world-view, such answers don't make sense. In Swahili, because measurement is not an abstract, the answer is meaningful – it tells the questioner all that they need to know about *how* this measurement was done. For the speaker, this is the really important thing. Similarly, the absence of an abstract 'time' leads to different ways of making sense of experience: 'When was your son born, Mulenga?'; 'My son was born two rainy seasons after the great drought' (ibid.: 1982: 37–8). As Fuglesang says, 'time only exists when it is experienced . . . In the African village . . . it is simply non-sensical to say "I do not have time"' (ibid.: 38).