The Presentation and Significance of Audience through History:
From Ancient to Modern and Postmodern

Ma’soumeh Bakhtiari

Full Time Faculty Member, English Literature Department,
Islamic Azad University, Karaj Branch, the Center of Islamic and Human Sciences Studies, Karaj, Iran
Mbakhtiari@kiau.ac.ir
Bakhtiyari@yahoo.com

Abstract:

From ancient Greek tragedy till postmodern era, the audience and his role has been central to literary as well as variety of media studies. One may recall the Dionysian festivals in which men and women were not only audiences but active participants of a purely dramatic phenomenon. The same audience continues throughout history, during Renaissance and after. However, with the rise of Enlightenment during modern epoch, audience is represented and perceived in a radically contradictory way through some social critics such as Theodore Adorno and his Frankfurt school colleagues. The passive audience as Adorno depicts in his polemical work Dialectics of Enlightenment is viewed as mass or outcome which has no resistance to what is predigested for him, since he is thoroughly under the spell of what Adorno calls “Culture Industry”. The postmodern studies, on the other hand, posit audience as an active agent who collaborates in Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives”, the discourse of power and the structure of domination as the American philosopher and sociologist John Fiske puts the point focal to his analyses, along with Michael de Certeau’s emphasis on the interaction between culture and society and the way it is integrated into audience study and Stuart Hall’s “encoding-decoding” theory. Based on the postmodern definition it is the audience which acts upon the media, going against the grain and struggling to search for one’s own voice. Audience members, thus, can be seen not only as individual agents but also participants in the larger dynamics of social structure. All contribute to the ongoing creation and evolution of audience via history. Consequently the postmodern audience in a rather sophisticated manner reflects the voices of the Dionysian partakers.

Key words: Dionysus, passive audience, active audience, Adorno, John Fiske, Certeau, ancient, modern, postmodern