



'ATLANTA' & REALITY

By Timothy Lerma, University of Texas at El Paso, USA
(tilerma@miners.utep.edu)

ABSTRACT.

The purpose of the present study is to show the power of television programming and its ability to influence an audience's thoughts and opinions on the world away from the screen through the example of FX's hit show 'Atlanta,' a show created by the multitalented Donald Glover aka Childish Gambino. This study examines how shows such as 'Atlanta' use current events, from social to cultural topics within the news media, to help reach a broader audience of news as it's incorporated into plots within the first season's episodes. Each episode follows the protagonist "Earnest Marks," played by Donald Glover, as he takes on the role of a music manager for his cousin "Alfred Miles," who goes by the name "Paper Boi" in order to excel within the hip hop scene within the city of Atlanta. Each of the ten episodes goes into depth of hardship the characters face as they try to find success, it just so happens that within the episodes the story incorporates an issue, topic, that circulated the news and media throughout 2016. The present study identified several occasions where a talked about issue was incorporated within the series both subtly and exaggeratedly to help capture the attention of the audience as they put two and two together. Television programming is a vital tool for entertainment and news and has been for the last 60+ years. Research is needed to understand the correlation between fiction and reality, the theoretical framework used is rooted on the findings of topics within 'Atlanta' and the Cultivation Theory.

PROBLEMS TO BE EXAMINED.

Television shows, from cable to streaming services, are starting to become better and more relatable towards their audience as the years go by. Shows like ‘Atlanta’ have the ability to tap into the viewer and display good content with fictional, yet plausible, scenarios that seem out of this world, yet there is always a sense of realism and perspective. Race, politics, finances and music are just some topics covered within the first two seasons (The show debuted in September 2016). The characters are likeable, and for some, relates to people in certain ways depending the situation as far as attitudes and outcomes of scenarios.

What I’m searching to find is to see how this show impacts their viewers and their perspective on the “real world,” reality. I want to see how people react and think after viewing the first season as well as each episode from the show and if the content is able to connect with the viewer on a current social topic, (at the time). Within this research I want to study how the viewer reacts towards reality, whether it be feelings, thoughts, opinions, stances, etc.

Within the last couple of years, we as a country have endured surreal issues and controversial topics whether it be gun control, mental health topics and hardships among middle to lower class families. Television is a means of escape from the “real world,” it’s a form of media that allows people to sit within the comfort of their own home and escape the lingering troubles of the world. There are shows who use current event topics to help mold an episode throughout a story not only to make the scenes and dialogue relatable, but to also shed light on an issue that has yet to have a solution or resolvable. ‘Atlanta’ is one of those shows and I feel it should be used in this research because it attracts a larger audience and sheds light to issues worth discussing over with an interested audience.

JUSTIFICATION FOR RESEARCH.

I believe this research should be done now because television shows such as ‘Atlanta’ are only going to get better within time and more creative from here on out and it would be interesting to see how it impacts their audiences and their views on the world as they perceive it. There are some shows that hit current topics and social issues within society, though some may be completely satire, there’s still some truth within those scenes with a subliminal message. I think research should be done to cover that because it would be intriguing to see if a target audience has some feelings, or a new insight, as to how they perceive the world for what it has to offer both good and bad. The research would consist of an audience watching the first season, ten episodes, of ‘Atlanta’ while understanding the time period in which the season aired (Fall of 2016) and the revolving topics that circulated the media before and during the airing of the show. Examples such as the debate of climate change, data security, the presidential election, drones and self-driving cars, mental health and of course gun violence were just some of the most talked about topics within 2016 that helped shape some of the episodes within ‘Atlanta.’

BACKGROUND INFORMATION.

‘Atlanta’ is a show created by Donald Glover that debuted on the FX network back in the fall of 2016. The show is based within the city of Atlanta and tells the story of the character Earnest ‘Earn’ Marks, played by Glover, as he tries to strive as a music manager for his cousin/artist Alfred ‘Paper Boi’ Miles within the Atlanta rap scene. Throughout the process, the first two seasons, the cousins are dealt with situations and scenarios that require them to figure out solutions. Though the vast majority of these dilemmas are satire and fictional, to an extent, there still lies glimpses of realism and perspective; whether it be about mentally disabled men in jail, money, reality stars, club experiences or child care, the show has a way to see past the episodes as a whole and invite the viewer to see what’s really going on in society through a television screen.

Television is a main source of information and entertainment in today’s climate, despite technological advances through computers, radio, tablets and cell phones. Television and its programming are also linked to an audience’s views and perceptions on how they see the world as well as current events revolving within the news, it impacts a viewer’s thoughts and emotions whether it be good or bad.

Television programming has been linked to what will later be discussed as the cultivation theory, a theory that details the effects and perception of a grand audience as far as how much television viewing impacts their everyday lives. We live in a time where almost everyone has a television, an estimated 7.8 billion within the world and in estimate of 118.4 million estimated according to the Nielsen’s National Television Household Universe Estimates. Among those numbers are people who have a favored programming, whether it be on cable television or streaming service, that allow them to escape reality and enter a world based on the universe of the show. Action, adventure, drama, comedy, fiction or nonfiction are all characteristics that mold the television experience, it allows viewers to dictate what they allow themselves to see and ignore. Not only is television everywhere, it’s a big part of our everyday lives, almost every other bar and restaurant people go to will more than likely see a television hung up displaying some kind of programming, typically either sports or the news. Barbershops, dental and medical offices, even schools have at least one television set up somewhere to help ease and distract the minds of those around. You cannot escape them.

PERSPECTIVE AND SYSTEM OF BELIEFS AS A MEANS FOR TESTING.

My plan to create intellectual knowledge will be through philosophy/perspective/system of beliefs. Because this research consists of television programming and surroundings, it only makes sense that perspective will be the main source of creating intellectual knowledge. This research itself is based on quality, it’s about reading into things that aren’t there and/or having opinions, making interpretations, that may appear to be odd, excessive or even idiosyncratic.

System of beliefs play a factor as well, mainly from the perspective of the audience. A system of beliefs can be categorized into three different categories; values, beliefs and attitudes. Values would be the audiences’ notions of right and wrong, beliefs

would be the notion of true and false, and attitudes would be the notion of like and dislike. These play factors for this research from the standpoint of an audience member dissecting the episodes of 'Atlanta' to find the hidden and subliminal issues that not only take place between the characters and throughout the show but outside the tv programming, reality, the "real world."

The viewers will create intellectual knowledge through values, what they see as right and wrong within the episodes, beliefs, is what they are being shown similar to what plays out within current events (society), and attitudes, does the audience like or dislike the way the characters in the show respond/react towards certain issues they are faced with.

CULTIVATION THEORY.

The theory I believe that fits the theoretical framework will be Cultivation Theory. Cultivation Theory is an idea of an approach that was developed by Professor George Gerbner, who was the dean of Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, that began in the 60's when Gerbner started his "cultural indicators" research project on which he would study how watching television influenced viewer's ideas of what everyday world was like. Theorists among Cultivation have argued that television has indeed a long-term effect that are described as indirect yet cumulative and significant.

Assumptions and statements based on Cultivation Theory include suggestions in television being responsible for shaping "cultivated viewers" on conceptions of social reality. It's reviewed that massive quantities of exposure to television programming by an audience over time shapes a perception of social reality for individuals and for the typical television viewer culture in general. Gerbner argues that mass media shapes attitudes, as well as values, that are already within a busy culture. Gerbner also argues that television influences middle-of-the-road political perspectives, which within the show of 'Atlanta' plays a role within one of the episodes.

Among cultivation theory lies two different effects, "first order" and "second order." "First order" effects are classified as general beliefs about everyday world, an example would be the generality of violence in everyday life. "Second order" effects are linked to specific and detailed attitude's; an example would be law and order and personal safety. There is also a distinction between "heavy viewers" and "light viewers." "Heavy viewers" are obviously an audience of viewers who watch a great amount of television who are then influenced by which our world is framed by television programming regarding vast topics where the viewer has a first-hand experience. A "light viewer" is almost the opposite in which the audience have access to more sources of information.

According to Gerbner, cultivation analysis typically deals with a correlation of data based off content analysis with survey data from a research based on an audience in participation. It requires a large quantity amount of public opinion poll organizations that include national survey question pertaining to issues such as the amount of daily violence within life. For this research our data will be collected through an audiences' personal responses within a period of time, a summer, where it will then be analyzed and placed in one of two categories.

Because cultivation theory has to do with television programming it fits perfectly within my proposed research study. Gerbner studied and knows the impact television has on a wider range of audience and the theory holds to this day. Compared to the 60's, television has way more to offer as far as what is being shown all day, every day, and there's more of a target audience for certain programming. Examples include programming such as the Disney Channel, Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon whose main demographic are typically children between the ages of 2-11. There is ESPN one and two along with FS1 whose target focus is the sports demographic, partnerships with other networks such as TBS, ABC, NBC and CBS are also included. "Atlanta" is shown on the FX network, a network known for displaying more fictional, television series' that range from comedy to drama to even animation.

Aside from the research proposal itself, I've written a research paper, within the spring semester of 2017, that included cultivation theory within the music video of Kanye West's "All Falls Down," which also fit into the idea of television playing a part of someone's perception of reality as far as how they perceive themselves and how the world/society should view them the way they see fit. (The relationship equation is Communication + Thoughts.)

COMMUNICATION THROUGH MASS MEDIA.

I plan on using mass media as my aspect of communication. Not only is this the best method of communicating towards an audience for TV proposals, it's also a bigger, more efficient way of gaining insight as to what people think of the show as well as their thoughts on the subject matter within each of the ten episodes of the first season. The communication flows from a sender or messages to a large number of receivers of messages, using a hashtag such as #Atlanta Reality Research would greatly help the study by pinpointing the audience that are contributing within the research as well as getting their thoughts on what they see in an episode and relating a topic or issue in today's society and times.

Intrapersonal and interpersonal communications could be used within this study, and to an extent, being that the audience may or may not view the show either by themselves or with others and use early each other to form thoughts and opinions. However, with mass media, people are able to reach a broader and more precise audience base who share the same thoughts as others about the topics. On top of that, media is the only platform that can reach out to people whether it being from the news, radio, social media platforms and even word of mouth. It's what's grown within the last decade due to various advances for the sole benefit of informing the people, us.

METHODOLOGY.

Qualitative would be the best methodology to use for my research, mainly because the research is based off experiences as opposed to numbers and statistics.

The data collection I'm planning to use will be first hand, primary. I'd be involved with obtaining and viewing observations through hashtags used throughout social media platforms just as Twitter, maybe Instagram as well, but mainly through Twitter.

My unit of analysis will be based on two categories. The first being based on how detailed and in-depth people describe similarities among the episodes and what they see within society today, comparing and contrasting similarities as far as details and topics that are viewed more in depth and how it affects people. The second will be based on almost the same as the first unit of analysis only if people form and/or pitch in ideas as to how to solve issues relating to the episode and reality then they will be placed in the second unit as they've gone a little extra to figure out a solution, which tells me they're thinking and applying themselves to help change the world for the better.

The plan is to take a summer, June and July, to frame and conduct data collection since typically our target demographic has a short break in between semesters, if they're enrolled students, plus I feel it's a part in the year where people tend to recap on shows and films for leisure.

I'm planning to examine people's experiences within today's society, with both the good and bad, whether it have to do with politics, financial dilemmas, pop culture, social/race issues and progresses, etc. From that I hope the people participating will keep this information in mind when they start viewing the show and dissecting the episodes.

The population/sample I will be focusing on will be the demographic of young adults, ages 18-26. I feel this is the target range of age that the show gravitates too. The show overall has to do within today's standards and ideas as they take bits of realism as to what people face in today's society, applying it to the episodes to highlight a bigger issue.

DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS.

My research findings will be disseminated throughout various means of access. Social media is a massive foundation for displaying content and information throughout a wide range of websites and media so I'd start there. My main templates would be the top three social networking platforms ranked among one billion users. Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Accounts would be made for the findings and links would be inserted in the description as well as a preview of the outcome that we were able to find. For YouTube I'd make a thirty to forty-five second video detailing the purpose and general findings done for the research and have a link to the description where the viewers can access to view the full findings and synopsis of "Atlanta & Reality." Facebook and Instagram are a little easier to work with. For Facebook I'd simply post a summary of the shows background along with a link of the research and its outcome within the paragraph so that it may be viewed. The same goes for Instagram, only I'd post a picture of the shows DVD cover with a brief description of the show and research along with a link as well.

Along with social media platforms I plan on trying to gain a partnership with Borderzine so that I may post the article on their website so that a college demographic can view and observe my findings and research tactics. A college level demographic would help greatly for my findings since the show appeals towards that 19-26 years of age group. If possible I want to also bring my findings to local news media's such as KVIA and KFOX, I feel this research needs to be spread throughout a community first before it reaches a higher ground, starting the layout here within the Borderland and

expanding out will tell me if my choice of research is in fact interesting and worth getting into or if perhaps the show and its hidden surrealism of current events isn’t enough to capture the attention of a greater audience. Whether it be on the newspaper or an actual news segment within the morning or evening news, I’d hope for at least a few minutes with an anchor and/or journalist to talk about why this research was done and for what purpose it serves the community and the greater good for television programming.

Lastly, I’d hope to be able to attend a few student conferences within UTEP, EPCC or even around the Bordertown with schools such as NMSU. Again, my goal is to reach a grand audience to show and discuss my research with people who are interested in television and what it has to offer. Advertising would be done within campuses and social media. Flyers with information as far as a quick summary and article information would be used as well as updates and information on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and Instagram. I want my research to be as easily accessed for an audience as possible, people deserve to have a sense of knowledge and know if maybe they’re participants of this cultivation theory without really knowing it.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

As for my academic and career goals, I plan to obtain a master’s degree once I’ve completed my undergraduate. I am one semester away from graduating with a bachelors, majoring in Journalism and minoring in Film. I want to reach the highest degree of education I possibly can in order to have a better understanding of the world from a communication standpoint. Once I begin my quest for a master’s degree I plan on focusing on Journalism and figuring out every aspect of that profession in order to serve and inform the community and those around me.

As for career goals, I hope to one day write for a television show on a major, relevant, network; or possibly have my own show while still being a lead writer. Since I was a child I’ve grown up with a television near me. It’s helped form my thoughts and opinions, interests and dislikes and overall general curiosity of the world whether it be real or not.

This research would serve a great deal in my career in finding out viewers’ thoughts and opinions on shows that shed light on bigger, more talked about common issues within episodes, helping shed light on topics that need to be further discussed or talked about within a higher power for a solution. This research will give me an understanding of what people like and dislike and what they find entertaining as a means of escape from reality within the comfort of their own home.

I personally enjoy shows that have an impact on a social/cultural issue among society through the form of a drama or comedy. An example of this would be the second episode of ‘Atlanta,’ titled “Streets on Lock.” I won’t go into much detail of the episode, as it’s part of the research process itself, however, there is a scene in the episode that shows the protagonist waiting to be bailed out in a waiting room where several other men sit and await with him. There is one character who is seen as a regular, to the point where the officers in the room know him by a first name basis. However, the audience can see that this man in custody is clearly mentally and intellectually ill. The scene rolls

on and the ill man ends up playfully spitting on an officer, it then turns to the officer beating the man with a nightstick. The scene sheds light on how the topic of mental illness is ignored by authority and handled in a more physical manner. This specific scene shouldn’t sit well with a viewer, in fact, it should spark conversation within the individual as to how situations as such should be handled, which is the purpose of this research. I want to get people thinking of topics such as mental health and how it’s viewed by different parties within the world, society, today outside of a tv screen.

FACULTY ADVISOR.

I have chosen Professor Roberto Avant-Mier (ravantmier@utep.edu) as the faculty member who will serve as a guide for my research. I have taken two courses with Dr. Avant-Mier, “Film Theory and Criticism” & “Chicano Cinema”, and I will be taking one more course with him next semester, “Cinematic Auteurs.” I have chosen Dr. Avant-Mier for several reasons. For one he understands cinematic art and deeper meanings within scenes, dialogue and characters. Avant-Mier has written movie reviews and pieces pertaining to cinema as a whole, which tells me he knows what he’s talking about and he has the ability to dissect a film and gather information as far as how the audience may or may not perceive the hidden meaning/story that’s being shown.

Professor Avant-Mier has a PhD from the University of Utah and has been in the Department of Communication here at UTEP since 2010; beforehand Mier taught at Boston college. Professor Avant-Mier wrote a book in 2010 titled “Rock the Nation: Latin/o Identities and the Latin Rock Diaspora” as well as several research articles such as “The Journal of International & Intercultural Communication,” “The Journal of Popular Music Studies,” and “The Review of Communication.”

Despite Professor Avant-Mier’s main focus among Latino/Hispanic identity and cultures within cinema from past and present, I feel he is able to understand the idea and purpose of this research and captivate what is being shown on a television screen and what is being played out among our very eyes within the news and current events topics of today.

LITERATURE REVIEW.

The relationship between people’s perspectives of television programming and reality are dynamic and complex. This investigation focuses on the study of an audience’s perspective on the world and finding subliminal and exaggerated instances, within current events topics and issues, after viewing the first season of FX’s hit show ‘Atlanta.’ The present study examines television programming through the lens of Bijan Stephen’s take on the show, Darren N. Adjei’s thoughts of perspective by incongruity among race in the media, Mansoor Al-Surmi’s findings on authenticity among television shows and L.J. Shrum. Robert S. Wyer, Jr. and Thomas C. O’Guinn’s research on the effects of television consumption on social perceptions.

Stephen breaks down ‘Atlanta’ from the characters to surrealism to camera techniques and the way the show helps the viewers identify how Atlanta, the city, is looked upon. Stephan wrote about how the show displays surrealism of black life in

America without typical network explanations since it comes straight from the creator's mind. (Stephan, 2018, p. 7) Stephen goes on to compare the shows "ethos" to the once popular brand "FUBU: For Us, by us," which I think is the best description to describe the overall creation of the show. Stephen goes on to write about his thoughts on the shows characters and how similar race is played throughout the season. "Anyone who identifies as part of a minority knows how easy it is to be erased, and how just how dangerous living in that erasure can be." (Stephen, 2018, p.8).

Adjei also wrote about 'Atlanta' yet he used race in media and perspective by incongruity to detail his findings and similarities between the show and in today's day in age. "The television series captures these exact complexities and contradictions that are so present in traditional portrayals of African Americans." (Adjei, 2018, p.3). Adjei goes in to details on mass media influencing audiences' paradigms and the extent to which the audience is influenced to the scholarly community. Adjei uses cultural theorist Stuart Hall's theory on how humans extract meaning out of characters, settings and scenes produced by the media as far as interpreting media within personal experiences. (Adjei, 2018, p.4). Adjei concludes this portion of race in media by describing depictions and common perceptions. "Not only do these negative depictions illustrate the perceptions that white America has of African Americans, but they justify unfair treatment by bureaucracies such as local law enforcement." (Adjei, 2018, p.60. "The perception of blackness as a threat is a common factor in police-civilian interactions, and research indicates an association between aggression and blackness: 'white people in the United States tend to apply stereotypes of violence and aggression more strongly to black men than black women.'" (Adjei, 2018, p.7). As for perspective, Adjei simplifies the argument that the method is used for analyzing ideas in personal or social contexts. Basically, perspective of incongruity challenges traditional ways of thinking with a new, fresh, perspective.

Al-Surmi's piece on authenticity and tv shows goes into detail on authentication in a spoken context, criteria for identifying authentic spoken materials and variation and multidimensional analysis that I feel fits in with my research. Al-Surmi classifies authenticity as a vague term since there are multiple meanings on the term, yet he focuses on one or more aspects of the word. He gives an example of Porter and Robert's (1987) definition, stating it emphasizes purpose and intention related to production of a piece of discourse in question. (Al-Surmi, 2012, p.672). Furthermore, Porter and Roberts state that "authentic texts are those that 'reflect a naturalness of form and an appropriateness of culture and situational context that would be found in the language used by native speakers.'" (1988). Al-Surmi goes on to speak on authentic spoken discourse as it reflects many features of naturally occurring discourse as possible. "These features include, but are not limited to, natural speed, natural phonological phenomena, high-frequency vocabulary, colloquialisms, hesitations, false starts, self-corrections, backchanneling, and minimal responses. (Rost, 2002, p.125). As for Al-Surmi's analysis, a method called corpora was used as it recorded and documented natural conversation from popular tv shows. "It was carefully designed to be representative of American conversation." (Al-Surmi, 2012, p. 680). His results showed how different show formats (sitcom and soap opera) carried different natural conversation in terms of their linguistic and functional features represented within the dimensions. (Al-Surmi, 2012, p. 683).

Shrum, Wyer and O’Guinn studied the effects of television consumption on social perceptions using priming procedures to investigate psychological process. Research had showed that the average American family watched on average seven hours of tv per day, along with that the average individual consumed over four hours per day. (Nielsen 1995). “The studies reported in this article investigated the possible effects of & heavy television consumption on viewers’ social perceptions.” (Shrum, Wyer, O’Guinn, 1998, p. 447). These gentlemen used two studies to investigate heavy television viewing and its affects on consumers’ perceptions of social reality and the cognitive processes underlying the effects. Their results suggested that the cultivation effect can be explained through general terms of influence of tv exemplars on judgments based on the availability of heuristic. “Moreover, the effects of priming suggest that television viewing has a significant, causal influence on perceptions of the prevalence of crime and occupations...however, these results do not indicate that television viewing is the only causal factor.” (Shrum, Wyer, O’Guinn, 1998, p.455).

REFERENCES.

- Stephen/Project Muse, B. (2018). Atlanta Dreaming. *Dissent*, 65(3), 10.
- Adjei/California Polytechnic State University, D. N. (2018). "Perspective by Incongruity" Applied to Depictions of Race in the Media.
- Al-Surmi/Tesol Quarterly, M. (2012). Authenticity and TV Shows: A Multidimensional Analysis Perspective.
- Shrum/Journal of Consumer Research, Inc., L. J., Wyer, Jr., R. S., & O'Guinn, T. C. (1998). The Effects of Television Consumption on Social Perceptions: The Use of Priming Procedures to Investigate Psychological Processes.
- Stein/Spartan Daily, B. (2018, March 8). 'Atlanta is all about 'Paper Boi'. *Spartan Daily* [San Jose, Ca], p. 1.