



Media Fascinations

**Perspectives
on Young People's
Meaning Making**

Ingegerd Rydin (ed.)

NORDICOM

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Media Fascination
Perspectives on Young Peoples Meaning Making

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Preface

The idea to write a book was born during meetings at the Nordic Network on Children, Young People and the Media (BUM), sponsored by the Nordic Foundation Norfa. The initiators have long experience as teachers and researchers in the field of children and media culture, and have often been frustrated over the amazing lack of research progress in this area. We all knew from our own research that what is happening when you are “out in the field”, talking to and observing children, is something different from what is depicted in most textbooks on children and the media.

Generally, we think that the media students of today, who have grown up with television and new media, have a different attitude towards the media society than do older generations. We hope that they will recognize the situations described in this book. It is written for them.

We are very happy that the book is finally being published, and we would like to thank Ulla Carlsson, Director of NORDICOM, who has supported the project from the very beginning. NORDICOM bears the bulk of the financial costs. We would also like to thank the Swedish Scientific Council for giving us a grant for proofreading of the manuscript.

Halmstad in June, 2003

Ingegerd Rydin

Jesper Olesen

Karin Hake

Elise SeipTønnessen

Introduction

Ingegerd Rydin

This book presents different perspectives on children's and young people's relationships to the media. However, all contributions revolve around the issue of how the young audience makes sense of the media, that is, their meaning making processes. Our basic assumption is that recipients approach texts with a fundamental expectation of finding meaning, and that they take an active part in creating meaning in their encounter with texts. As will be argued below, the meaning derived from media texts can take many forms, involving cognitive, emotional and social perspectives. Moreover, it will be shown that meaning making is a process that occurs within a sociocultural context.

The collection comprises a number of separate studies on children's and young people's interactions with screen-based electronic media, with focus on television, but also new media such as Internet and computer games. The bias towards television studies makes sense, because even if television is currently regarded as an "old" medium, children devote more time to it than to any other single medium. One aim is that the reader should gain a better understanding of *real audiences*. Much has been written and said about children and the media, but we seldom have access to the *child's own voice*. By providing numerous examples of conversations and interviews with children from recent qualitative studies in the Scandinavian countries, we would like to offer an alternative picture of the media in children's lives – a picture that can serve as a complement to the survey and panel data that are regularly published. Also, rather than focussing on the "distressing perspective", which often has a normative bias, we would like to give the reader an opportunity to approach the actual interactions with the media through conversations between children as well as between children and researchers.

Although the authors represent different disciplines and sometimes vary in their theoretical frameworks, they all apply qualitative methods, such as ethnographical observations and in-depth interviews, with the intention to capture the child's or adolescent's own conceptions, opinions or dispositions in relation to media texts. Some contributions take a sociological perspective as their point of departure. Others take a more sociocultural approach

– stressing children’s various experiences with texts by considering factors such as informal and formal schooling as well as social background – which ties into social psychology as well as developmental psychology. Still other contributions are based in the humanistic sciences, such as literary theory and film theory, and tie into the tradition of Cultural Studies.

To start with, we find it important to situate media research on children and young people in contemporary discourses on childhood and growing up in modern society. We usually think of childhood as a transitional phase that must be passed through before entering adulthood. Childhood is more or less regarded as a pre-stage to adulthood. This view has profoundly influenced research on children in most areas, including media studies. One possible consequence of this view is that children are viewed as vulnerable victims of the influences of the media, rather than as active agents, trying to orient themselves in society. However, by relying on the insights of Michel Foucault, we should reflect on our conceptions of what constitutes a child or an adolescent. These categories do, in fact, have histories and are always in the process of transformation (Danaher, Shirato & Webb, 2000). In other words, the discourse on what constitutes childhood has varied throughout history. David Buckingham (2000) suggested, for example, four areas of activity that are traditionally incompatible with a “good childhood”. These areas are work, consumption, violence and sex – activities belonging to adulthood. When they occur in childhood, they are perceived as misplaced. But historically, research on children and media has presented numerous examples of how children transgress boundaries and enter the adult world, both through their media consumption and through their actions.

The American sociologist William Corsaro (1993) used the concept of “interpretative reproduction,” which implies that one should regard development as a matter of acting adequately and creating meaning based on socially understandable premises. This is a prerequisite for being able to orient oneself in the surrounding world. Such a view does not separate children from adults, but instead stresses that children have had fewer experiences than have adults. Both children and adults are actively and creatively involved in the construction and reconstruction of culture.

One discourse about childhood that has been prominent during the twentieth century has been the idea of the “developing child” and the notion that development proceeds in stages. This idea has been predominant in education as well as in media-related issues, such as programming and research. In this book, we will present examples of works belonging to this “older” discourse based on developmental theory, however with emphasis on sociocultural developmental aspects. We will also present “newer” discourses that have their origin in the British sociology of childhood tradition, emphasizing the “social child” rather than the “developing child”. *Jesper Olesen* carries this discussion further and bases his arguments on Corsaro’s theoretical perspective. Olesen advocates the concept of the “social child” and challenges contemporary international and particularly Scandinavian media research on

children, thereby contributing a critical discussion. He would like to see more methodological reflexivity as well as increased contextualization with respect to research on children.

Emotional aspects will be focused in studies dealing with the intersecting perspective of “meaning” and “fascination,” for example, the psychological dilemma faced while viewing: the relationship between insecurity, fear, excitement and fascination as opposed to security and trust. Such studies may also elucidate why sadness, fear and terrifying experiences attract young viewers even though such experiences involve feelings of risk and insecurity. *Karin Hake* focuses on the concept of *fascination*. What are the characteristics of media content to which children are strongly attracted? The concept of fascination is applied in order to characterize how children react to TV programmes. Using this concept, she wishes to highlight the affective elements of the reception process in addition to the cognitive process of meaning making. The concept is borrowed from Bent Fausing, who described fascination as “an attraction that includes joy as well as scepticism, and may even include strong dislikes; excitement and horror, in addition to delight.” Fascination, therefore, includes ambivalence: a sentiment or attitude that involves enthusiasm, attraction or a tense, sceptical attitude as well as certain reluctance in the face of these impressions. Both pleasure and terrifying experiences are dimensions included in the concept of fascination, and may result in considerable ambivalence. The concept of fascination includes an attraction that covers “an unspoken dimension” more profound than the intellectual and analytical level.

A major theme in the book is the text reception process, which brings the concept of *meaning* into focus. Ever since people began communicating through texts – in the broadest sense through pictures, words, songs, etc. – the challenge of interpretation has been confronted. Human beings simply strive for meaning, which does not imply that we find any text meaningful, or that different people derive the same meaning from a given text. Communication through mediation, whether in the form of writing, sound or images, is characterized by a fundamental division in time and space between the context of production and that of reception. The meaning derived from the text is not necessarily the same in these two contexts. This is one reason why media researchers have placed more emphasis on the reception process in media communication.

Our basic view is that meaning is not a fixed entity, contained in the text. Meaning is more than content and more than logic; it develops in a complex interaction between the text and the recipient. *Elise Seip Tønnessen* gives a brief presentation of the position of reception theory from two angles: First, the historical development from hermeneutics; second, as one of the audience-oriented directions of media studies. Two rivalling perspectives in reception theory will be discussed, one studying the meaning-making process from the perspective of the text (e.g., Wolfgang Iser, Umberto Eco), the other from the perspective of the recipient (e.g., Stanley Fish). Arguing that both

perspectives are necessary in order to investigate the processes of receiving a media text, the consequences of this view for research will be discussed and illustrated through empirical examples.

From the text perspective, relevant questions are: How do we analyse a media text (e.g., the television programme *Sesame Street*) in order to reveal how it invites the recipient to take active part in the process of meaning making? What is the relationship between text and context (for such a globally spread media text)? From the recipient's perspective, relevant questions concern what constitutes an interpretative community. What is the relationship between an individual and a cultural view of reception? What role do previous text experiences and other cultural dispositions play?

Ingegerd Rydin also concentrates on the concept of meaning in the reception process by looking at television stories. Viewing television as a text means that it must be read or decoded in some way. Viewers need a kind of "language" to decode the flow of pictures and sound on the screen. However, the unique feature of television as medium is that it often presents sound and pictures that match our everyday experiences to such an extent that we can use our ordinary sign systems to decipher its texts. Our everyday sign systems for meaning making, language and visual codes are appropriate and we do not need *a priori* training as when we are learning to read print. However, when following a televised story, we must also be familiar with specific cinematic and narrative codes in order to gain meaning and understanding. In this context, Roland Barthes' theory of *narrative codes* is used. Once again, the link between cognitive and emotional processes in meaning making is studied. It appears that emotional involvement, in the sense of children's degree of identification with characters, affects how children will interpret a story and that gender plays a crucial and complex role in this process.

The reception process is always embedded in a sociocultural context from which it cannot be separated. In the terminology of Pierre Bourdieu, children grow up with different cultural capital and habitus. *Elise Seip Tønnessen* presents material from a series of studies, covering the age range from four to twelve years. Children's retellings of television stories (reception), as well as constructions of their own television stories (production) are analysed in relation to their cultural environment at home and in school. The crucial question is why some children present more coherent, logical and well-formed narrations in response to a television program than do others. It would seem that children who are socialized into the legitimate culture of book narratives present more complete and coherent interpretations when interviewed about their readings of television. These children have learned the cultural codes for talking about culture at large. They fit into the school norm for storytelling. Moreover, these children also enjoy being in the centre and talking about their cultural practices such as reading experiences and media habits. However, sociocultural background influences the interpretation and reading of television in a complex way, which will be shown through a

number of illustrative cases, where some children are studied in detail with particular focus on the concepts of habitus and cultural capital.

Since the middle of the 1980's, a number of thorough reception studies have shown convincingly that many media consumers are actively interpretative even when they are apparently sitting passively in front of the TV, or have their eyes glued to a magazine. On the other hand, there is a conspicuous lack of studies stressing textual analysis and interpretation of a media text compared to the wealth of observation and interpretation of consumers' reception. *Karen Klitgaard Poulsen*, who bases her study on the American series *Beverly Hills*, claims that the current research on popular, fictional series for young people or on young people's fan culture is often purely ethnographically orientated and tends to disregard the text. She stresses the ambiguous and polysemic statements in the series and urges media scholars to treat qualitative text analysis as seriously as qualitative and quantitative studies of reception. She asserts that many physical and linguistic stylizations and stagings, and many of the interpretative constructions that young people make – which they may argue they themselves have reached by negotiation and evaluation – are written into the text itself.

Modern fictional series are simply narrated and transparently constructed. On the other hand, they offer the experienced viewer a number of extra meanings and ambiguities, thereby giving recipients the feeling of having penetrated the entire text. Their manner of reception is, thus, often ironic, humorous, or in other ways distanced and self-reflective. But recipients often swallow the bait prepared by the producers, authors, and directors of the series who, of course, have a clear goal in mind. While some young people make ironic remarks about the series and apparently distance themselves from it, they still imitate it and identify themselves with it, because this double attitude to the plot and narrative style of the series is already written into the text. It may appear in the dialogue, in the style, and in the narrative styles and themes that set the stage for distance and introspection.

The two last chapters will be devoted to new media, such as computer games and Internet. *Barbro Johansson* presents a study of how children make sense of computer games. She takes her point of departure in a play situation in order to elucidate ethical issues in child discourse, for example when a group of boys play *Bonkhead*, a computer game that derives its attraction from humorous violence. The text of this game is about death, play, fantasy and reality. In this context, a number of themes will be discussed, such as struggle and competition, caring and friendship, as well as empathy and distance. The overriding theme of this chapter will be ethical issues, such as what discourses the game evokes and what positions the participants take in relation to one another. The situation also contains ambivalence related to the sociocultural setting at hand as well as the sociocultural dispositions of the participating children.

In the final chapter, *Ulrika Sjöberg* presents data that are partly based on an extensive comparative European project, *Children, Young People and the*

Electronic Media, and inspired by Hilde Himmelveit's classic study of the role of television in British children's lives. The chapter situates reception of media content as well as interaction between text and recipient in a wider context by drawing attention to how the screen-based media, television and computers, are used in daily life as well as the meaning-making practices discernible in the readings of these media. Besides preferences of media content, various uses and the meanings attached to these media are explored. Sjöberg elucidates the embeddedness of media in children's and adolescents' daily lives. Thus, her work ties into what Olesen calls "contextualization" and emphasizes the mediated socialization process of growing up in contemporary society.

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Chapter 1

Why Do We Study Children's Media Use the Way We Do?

Discussions on Methodological Reflexivity

Jesper Olesen

Ever since commercial tv channels were introduced in Denmark in 1988, the impact of commercial messages on children has been a recurring topic in the public debate. Criticized particularly has been the concentration of commercials directed to children at Christmas time and the scheduling of commercials in direct connection with children's programmes. After the Gulf war, the phenomenon has been placed within a military discourse and termed "commercial carpet-bombing". This phrase is interesting because it attributes particular qualities to both the producer and recipient of the commercials. The producer is being compared to the US, a military and economic super power, while the recipient assumes the position of the victim of a merciless attack. Through this discursive strategy, the child audience is reduced to a passive victim of the persuasive power of commercials. The commercial industry and the toy industry respond to the discursive passivization of the child audience by representing children as a sophisticated and competent audience as well as critical consumers. Parents regularly express concern about children who – as opposed to them – are easily persuaded by commercials and consequently pester their parents to buy the advertised consumer good. The children's own opinions are, however, rarely heard in the debate. The most interesting aspect of this debate is not whether children are particularly passive, persuasive or competent, but the fact that particular representations of children serve certain cultural, social and economic ends. The debate reappears every Christmas due to the intensity of the commercial pressure put on children at this time of year. Clearly, it is of great importance how the child audience is understood, because certain images of children facilitate some social actions while making other actions seem impossible. This is important for the agents who have a vested interest in this audience group, but it is of utmost importance to the children themselves, whose lives are shaped by the understandings of children that prevail in society.

Representations of the Child Audience

The recurring controversy about children as an audience for tv commercials is a good example of how children are assigned particular discursive positions as media users, e.g., as a competent versus particularly vulnerable audience group. Discourse theory argues that social contexts such as families, peer groups and public space are structured by discourses (Laclau & Mouffe 1985), which define the relationship between social agents. The family is, for instance, organized by discourses that regulate the relationship between generations. It is important to stress that in real social contexts there is always more than one discourse. The social will never be organized by a single dominant discourse, but always by several competing discourses. However, one discourse might assume a hegemonic position and thus appear as more or less natural. But this discourse will not be able to completely block out all dissident voices. The dominant discourse about children has long been based on the perception of children as different from other audience groups. This discourse assumes that children are particularly sensitive to, for instance, media violence or they are assumed to pass through a particular phase of life during which the personality develops. Recently, there has been an oppositional tendency to see children as particularly competent and sophisticated readers of visual content and users of information technology in general (Tapscott 1998). The assumption that children are best understood by looking at the differences between children and adults is so well established that we only rarely question it. Over the years, disciplines concerned with children, such as biology, psychology, pedagogy and sociology, have confirmed this assumption. Professionals within these areas have discussed the meaning of being a child on the basis of theories about children's mental and physical development, children's cognitive development, their formation as cultural beings as well as on theories of how children are socialized as citizens. What unites these theoretical perspectives is their preoccupation with the developing child (James, Jenks & Prout 1998). During the past 15 years, an alternative perspective, questioning these fundamental assumptions, has gradually emerged. These new childhood studies have argued that the focus on the individual child's development through ages and stages emphasizes what children are not and what they are yet to become. Since children are about to achieve the maturity and skills required for full membership in society, the developing child perspective tends to place an entire group of citizens outside of society. The new childhood studies suggest that we should treat children as citizens of today instead of as citizens of tomorrow (Qvortrup 1993). The critique of the conventional understanding of children put forward by the sociology and anthropology of childhood is of great relevance to our understanding of children's media use. Instead of studying child media as instruments that either impede or promote children's development, we should see media as an integral part of children's cultural and social lives in childhood. Instead of studying media

as an informal school parallel to the real school or media institutions as agents of socialisation similar to family members and peers, we should begin to study how children make use of media when they relate to friends and family not with regard to their future adulthood, but with regard to their present childhood. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how the dominant discourses on childhood shape children's media use and how children are established as an audience in specific social contexts, both in everyday life and in research.

Social and Symbolic Communities

The above questions concern the relationship between the discursive and the social level of social practise. What opportunities do children have to oppose the dominant representations (mostly put forward by adults) of children as vulnerable, incompetent viewers who lack experience? What levels of autonomy are children offered in the discursive structures of the social? Berry Mayall (1994) argues that even though adults generally have organizational control over children's activities, children's interaction both with other people and with daily settings depends not so much on their absolute powerlessness vis-à-vis adults, but on the precise nature of the power relationship between the children and the adults in any given setting. People's impact on one another and on social conventions or requirements will vary across settings. Children will therefore be more successful in affecting their social environment in settings where adults are less likely to assume an authoritative position. Childhood is not experienced as one consistent set of relationships, instead it varies according to how the adults in specific social settings conceptualize children and childhood.

In media studies, it has become common to discriminate between 'social media users' and 'symbolic media users' (Drotner 1993). The first category is determined by socio-economic variables such as class, gender, ethnicity and generation, whereas the second is determined by their conventions of interpretation. Media studies inspired by sociology usually conceptualise viewers as social users, while studies carried out within the humanities perceive viewers as symbolic users. Researchers generally choose either one approach or the other. Let me briefly mention a few good examples of symbolic user studies carried out in the Danish context. Tove Arendt Rasmussen has conducted a reception study of young boys watching action films in a youth club (Rasmussen 1995) and Anne Jerslev has studied girls' use of horror movies in small groups (Jerslev 1998). Both studies depart from extant interpretative communities established around joint media preferences and their focus is restricted to the interpretations made by these groups of young boys and girls in one particular context. Now let us imagine that these studies had been expanded to include a variety of other social contexts where the same young people also use media (for example in their families, with friends of

the opposite sex and in the school). In this case, the social user dimension would have appeared more clearly. The young media users would not only appear as members of a range of different interpretative communities, thus displaying a multitude of interpretative strategies, they would also represent something they share across the different social contexts. They would also appear as social users characterized by their social class, gender, ethnicity, generation and so forth. These are social constructs they bring with them into the symbolic communities to which they belong. On the one hand, children belong to a particular generation category in all social contexts no matter whom they are with (friends of similar age in a peer group or parents and siblings in a family). On the other hand, what it means to belong to a particular generation category is itself subject to interpretation in each symbolic community. Generation does not have the same meaning and it is not equally important in all settings. Therefore some discourses on children and media are more likely to be activated in certain settings than in others. In other words, how children are positioned as an audience depends on an interpretation of what it means to belong to a particular generation category.

The Meaning of Generation in the Family

In this section, I would like to illustrate how the concept of generation assumes particular meanings in the family context and how these meanings draw on the most dominant discourses about children. The experiences children gain through media and with media are, for instance, often interpreted within the discursive framework of generation. The question is how children's media experiences transform into a social resource in the family context. In the book *The Sociology of Childhood* (1997), William Corsaro argued that children make their own interpretations of the world already from a very early age. Children enter the culture through the family, but come to collectively produce and participate in a series of peer cultures. As an alternative to the conventional understanding of how children are socialized into the adult world through a series of preconceived stages, Corsaro suggested the notion of interpretative reproduction. He made the basic assumption that children do not pass through childhood on an individual basis, but as members of a series of peer cultures that belong to the same generation. They do not just passively internalize adult skills and knowledge. Rather they creatively appropriate information from the adult world to produce their own unique peer culture. Thus, Corsaro argued that individual development is embedded in the collective production of a series of peer cultures, which in turn contribute to reproduction and change in the wider adult society (p. 26). Those experiences gained in childhood are not left behind when the individual child eventually matures and enters the adult world. They stay with the child as part of its personal and collective life story. Furthermore,

every new generation is also born into a new historical context different from the one in which their parents grew up. Historical development has been very significant in determining the kind of media landscape children of a particular generation are surrounded by. In this domain, children clearly have to rely on their own experiences with new technology and program formats. I would like to illustrate how children have their own independent experiences with media and how those experiences form the basis for how they will deal with media in the future. The example comes from an interview I conducted with a 10-year-old girl (Olesen 2000a). She had discovered that a scary film was less scary if she saw it several times. There was, for example, a particular scene in a film that she thought was especially scary. In this scene, a stoat eats all the pigeons in a dovecote, because the window has been left open. She had seen the scene many times, and now she did not think it was at all scary. Although the intention was to reduce the emotional effect, it is hard to imagine that it was her parents who advised her to repeat the scenes she found particularly scary. Her way of relating to scary scenes is, therefore, clearly based on her own experiences. The example shows that children reflect over their media experiences and against that background develop useful ways of relating to media texts. Although children, as the girl in the example, are experienced to some extent, it is not a given that they will be equally treated as experienced. The social recognition of children's experiences depends on specific interpretative communities.

As mentioned above, one of the dominant discourses about children is based on the notion of the developing child. Within this discourse, childhood is a period in the individual's life leading towards adulthood. It is firmly rooted in psychological theory about children's development through ages and stages. There is supposedly a close connection between the child's age and stage of mental development, so that at a certain age the child is expected to have reached a particular mental level. The developing child discourse tends to treat children's use of the media as a learning process in which children gradually gain experience and competence according to their age. When this discourse is applied to children's use of the media in the family, it is often expressed as a concern that their natural development will be disturbed. Depending on the child's stage of mental development, certain types of media use will consequently be regarded as appropriate. This also means that actual use of the media can be above or below the estimated appropriate level. This argument can be illustrated by an example from the same study (*ibid.*). The mother of an 11-year-old boy describes his media preferences for cartoons and action movies. On the one hand, she finds his interest in cartoons a little childish – an interest she compares with playing with LEGO. On the other hand, she was a bit concerned about the action movies he watched when in the company of some of his friends. When the boys were watching videos together, she thought they tried to behave a little more grown-up than they actually were. She saw the films they watched as a sign that they pushed one another to watch stronger films than they

really wanted to. This evaluation of her son's use of the media implies a natural development model. On the basis of that model, the boy's preferences for cartoons were assessed as below the level of an 11-year-old, while action films were considered above this level. It is important to stress that this assessment of cartoons is contextually determined. In other contexts, it is permissible for children well above the age of 11 to watch cartoons without risking being regarded as childish or mentally backward. This is true, for example, every year at Christmas, when Danish TV shows the *Disney Christmas Show*. When that show is watched by a large number of children and adults, it is not considered an expression of childishness but one of tradition and nostalgia. In the first instance, the concept of generation is applied as a meaningful category to the boy's use of the media, but not in the second instance. Or to be more precise, generation is applied differently in relation to the reproduction of Christmas traditions. In this instance, the emphasis is on what binds generations together instead of what sets them apart.

Within the discourse on the developing child, there is a close relationship between the child's use of the media and the child's mental development. Another aspect of this discourse concerns the cultural formation of children, to which certain cultural and artistic experiences are closely tied. It is assumed, for instance, that the experience of more sophisticated art forms, such as classical music, paintings, art films and certain types of literature, depends on the comprehensive cultural capital of the viewer, reader or listener. And it is assumed that children do not possess the cultural capital necessary to fully enjoy and understand the depth of these advanced art forms. I would like to illustrate how particular types of experiences with the media serve as signs of cultural capital and of adulthood. The example is from an interview I conducted with an 11-year-old boy and his mother (Olesen 2000a). The mother talked about some film experiences she had had when she was young. Among other things, she had been in one of the first grades to have film studies in the state school. This had aroused her interest in Italian and French films. She also went often to an art cinema in Copenhagen, which at that time showed a series of films from the French New Wave. She mentioned some of her favourite directors from the sixties and seventies. Today these experiences formed a reference point for her when she saw new films and talked about them. This description of some of her most important media experiences reminded her son of a film he had seen recently. It was *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*. He could not recall the title, but when he recounted the story we could easily work out which film he was talking about. It is easy to understand why he thought of that particular film. It has a number of resemblances to the modernist films from his mother's youth. It is an Italian film. The story is set in the past when the film medium was quite new. Despite these apparent resemblances, *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* does not belong to the modernist era. So his mother pointed out for him that *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* is not an old film. The boy tried to home in on the "new wave" better with *Antonia*. He justified his suggestion by saying that it is a Dutch

film, and that one rarely has a chance to see one of them. His mother answered that she did not think it would be appropriate for him. Both the boy's suggestions show that he had a vague idea of what constitutes his mother's taste. He was aware that the films had to be "old", a criterion he tried to meet with *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*. However, in his suggestions he did not distinguish between films that take place in the past and films that were made in the past. He also had some idea that his mother preferred "special interest" films, which is a requirement met by *Antonia*. On the other hand, he was not aware that it was not enough for them to be "special interest". They had to be from a particular era that had a special interest for the generation that was young then. The mother's rejection of the boy's two film suggestions can, therefore, be understood as a defence of some cultural distinction between her own sophisticated taste and her son's less refined taste. It might have been possible for an adult to point out similarities between the two more recent films and the modernist era from the sixties. However, she is not likely to let her son do this, because cultural capital and age are connected. The boy's cultural experiences with *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* and *Antonia* cannot be compared to his mother's experiences in her youth, because she would risk undermining the value of the modernistic era as a sign of cultural capital if it were shared with a child.

From these few empirical examples, it can be seen that generation heavily influences the process by which children are established as an audience in contrast to adults. Within a discourse that emphasizes children's development in terms of psychological and cultural maturity, children are mainly positioned in subordinate viewer positions in the sense that they are characterized by what they lack compared to adult viewers. Seen from a social constructivist perspective, it is noteworthy that when children are together with adults, for instance in the family context, the situation mainly produces differences between the child audience and the adult audience. This meaning-making process causes the child audience to appear as an audience of a particular order: An order that is largely the result of specific relations between two generations (Olesen 2000b). The study on children as audience referred to in the above section shares a theoretical perspective with a number of new studies of childhood as a social construction. These studies have looked at how childhood is constructed and reconstructed through a variety of social processes occurring between children and adults in different social contexts. Susanne Højlund conducted a study of how Danish childhood as a socio-cultural phenomenon partly forms in the meeting between 9-year-old children and professional adults in three different institutions: a school, an after-school institution and a hospital. The three institutions and the social practices taking place within them produce different categorizations of children, which is pivotal for the children's experience of social identity (Højlund 2001). Bjørg Kjær looked at the social and cultural processes occurring between Danish children and pre-school teachers in an after-school centre. As a result of the interpretative processes taking place in

the institutions, both children and adults are assigned specific social positions (Kjær 2001). What we learn from these contextual studies of lived childhood is that children might well appear as a group with distinctive traits, but that this is due to social and cultural processes rather than simply inherent in their biological or psychological make up.

The Relationship between Media Perspectives and Representations of the Child

That we tend to understand children as basically different from other social groups has a great deal to do with the fact that we expect to find differences when we study children. This expectation is not only widespread in everyday life. It is also prevalent within the scientific context, which draws on a long tradition of interpreting children in terms of their differences. This tradition claims that, if we are to understand children, we must first understand how they differ from adults:

Only if children are different from adults in some crucial aspects in their response to TV can we justify attention to them as a special audience. (Hodge & Tripp 1986:73)

In *Children and Television*, Hodge and Tripp say directly that children are different from adults as viewers and that media studies should therefore treat them in a special way. They even stretch the assumption so far as to say that if there is no such difference between children and adults, one cannot justify dealing specifically with children. The only thing that is unique about the above quotation is that Hodge and Tripp explicitly formulate what the great majority of people in media studies assume as a natural premise for dealing with the child audience. However, determination of the nature of the child audience relies largely on the notion of the child implied in the theoretical perspective used in the specific media studies. Against the background of investigations carried out within the framework of the new childhood studies, it is relevant to consider what underlying rationales there are for looking for differences and what we neglect when we focus on the differences between children and adults rather than on the similarities. In order to address these questions, it is relevant to take a closer look at the interrelations between the views of the child and the views of the media in children's media studies. There are at least three fundamental perspectives on the relationship between children and the media: an essentialist perspective, a constructivist perspective and a contextualist perspective. Each perspective involves particular linkages between the view of the media and the view of the child. The perspective's view of the media determines whether the emphasis in media research will be on the text, the viewer or the con-

text, while the view of childhood determines the corresponding actor status of the child.

Essentialism

Essentialism emphasizes the inherent qualities of the child. It assumes that there is something genuinely childlike that contrasts with the nature of the adult. This essence is used to justify children being treated differently from adults. Chris Jenks (1996) gave a historical account of how two particular ideas of the essentially childlike have dominated Western thinking about children. He calls them the Dionysian child and the Apollonian child. The Dionysian child has a fundamental badness, which it is the responsible adult's task to control and, if necessary, break. The Apollonian child, on the other hand, contains a positive potential that requires care and stimulation to unfold in adult life. Jenks argues that these cultural ideas of the childlike co-exist and form an ideological basis for institutional practice, historically and today. This means that we orient our actions on the basis of these ideas when we relate to children, both in close relations, as in the family, and socially. This applies in connection with the issues of children's schooling, violence among children, advertising aimed at children, etc. In terms of the debate on children's use of the media, one can find the Dionysian child in the idea that the evil in children can be brought out by the inspiration of things like media descriptions of violence. The Apollonian child must be stimulated with media products of good quality to develop his/her potential. In essentialism, children form a special audience that differs from adults by virtue of their inherent childlike qualities. The essentially childlike can be interpreted both as something destructive and subversive, as in the Dionysian child, and as positive potential, as in the Apollonian child. In the context of children and media, the childlike has mainly been interpreted as certain things that children lack. They are assumed, among other things, to be particularly passive, vulnerable, inexperienced and incompetent, and therefore particularly susceptible to media messages. Children cannot be regarded as fully-fledged actors like adults, who are, by contrast, assumed to have all these qualifications. The essentialist perspective therefore tends to lead to studies of the effects of media on the child audience rather than of children's use of media (e.g., Postman 1983; Winn 1985; Werner 1986). Although effect research easily connects with notions of children that minimize their actor status, one must be careful not to fall into the opposite trap and underestimate or completely ignore the effects of the media. The greatest problem in applying an essentialist perspective to children's use of the media is not in the actual attention to the effects of the media, but in the tendency to essentialize the child audience. That is, it is regarded as fundamentally different from other audience groups. Children are attributed with a constant, ahistorical, inherent childishness. It is therefore equally problematic to ascribe positive

inherent competence to children, as has been done, for example, by the claim that children form a particular sophisticated group of picture-readers. Essentialism deals with the characteristics that apply to all children at all times, making the placing of children in time and space meaningless. The essentialist perspective, therefore, suggests that children's use of the media can be studied independently of historical and social contexts in which the media are used without any neglect of important information.

Constructivism

Constructivism emphasizes the actor status of children. Like all other viewers, they are active in terms of creating meaning from media products. With respect to the study of children, constructivism has primarily been typified by psychological theories. Jean Piaget (1968) and Lev Vygotsky (1978) are among those who have had most importance in stimulating the study of how children actively manipulate and adapt information from their environment and use it to build up their own view of the world. The activities of children are understood almost exclusively as cognitive processes, while the importance of wider cultural and social processes are played down. Major constructivist contributions to children's media studies have been made by, among others, Dorr (1986) and a variety of articles from this perspective have been collected by Bryant and Anderson (1983). In the most radical version of constructivism, it is the viewers alone who determine the meaning content, because media texts are only relevant in relation to them. Constructivism is the expression of a principle of equality, since everyone creates the meaning that is relevant to themselves in their lives. When meaning is relativized, no one can claim that any single interpretation is better or more correct than another. Thus any difference is cancelled out – including differences between the child and the adult audience; and the foundation for privileging adult forms of reception over children's disappears. Constructivist media studies often depart from a particular media text and look at the reception by a single or multiple audiences. There is a tendency for this perspective to be most interested in the here and now, where the viewer constructs the meaning, and this can be described as an "ad-hoc-ization" of the child audience. The social structures are subordinated to the action perspective, so constructivism has difficulty transcending the situational use of the media. It is not interested in the wider contextual conditions that are shared, for example, by a generation of children and that may distinguish it from previous generations. The effects that textual structures and social structures have on the child audience must give way to research on children's uses of the media. Although the child audience is granted actor status, it is important to be aware that its scope of action is conditioned. The programmes that are produced for the child audience – mainly by adults, and shown on media surrounded by a

normative field, indicating that certain ways of using the media are most “natural” – limit its freedom. True, the media produce raw material for children's social and cultural life, but this raw material is already rather refined. Despite the fundamental differences between essentialism and constructivism, they converge in marginalizing the time and space dimension: essentialism by emphasizing the universally childlike and constructivism by emphasizing the situational moment.

Contextualism

Contextualism stresses the world that surrounds children. Rather than focusing on the child, its interest is concentrated on childhood and children's culture. Although children are actors, their actions must be interpreted within the framework that society, in the broad sense, sets out for them (Qvortrup 1993). It is, for example, less interesting to study children's play *per se* if the spaces in which play can actually take place are disappearing because of increased traffic and other structural changes that affect the play environment. In terms of children's use of the media, there is an interest, for example, in the technological, economical and organizational factors in the media landscape, which are important for the programmes children are offered at all. In this connection, it is very important to understand the producers' conceptions of the audience for which they produce. Is it an audience that is mainly to be entertained or educated? Is it a high-priority or a low-priority audience, etc.? Structures of an ideological character may also create the framework for children's reception of media products through social meaning-creating processes. This perspective paves the way for a historicization of children's media use, since the media context changes over time and thus makes the development of new kinds of reception possible; for example video evenings, which not only require the existence of video technology, but also require space available to the children. A particularly striking change in the Nordic context is the transition from having only licence-funded TV channels to a media landscape consisting of channels with different degrees of licence and advertising funding. Contextualism must not be confused with structural determinism, where ideological and material structures alone are considered to influence children's meaning formation. The child audience has actor status and thus the ability to create meaning from media texts. The central point in contextualism is, however, to underscore that meaning never exists without a context. The context within which children use the media is very much created by the existing relationship between generations in society. It is interesting, for example, that children are organizationally distinguished as a special audience by the Danish national broadcasting corporation Denmark's Radio, since the Children/Youth department is the only department defined in terms of age, while the other programme divisions are

defined in terms of genre. One must assume that the rationale behind the organizational distinction is an assumption that one cannot target children in the same way as adults. It is therefore assumed to be more meaningful to separate children's and youth TV than to integrate it into the existing programming departments. Contextualism allows us to consider the tendency to treat children as a different audience in the production, as well as the reception, dimension. This is a perspective that lends itself to historical studies of the institutions framing children's media use.

Epistemological Considerations for the Future Study of Children and Media

Essentialism, constructivism and contextualism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. There is, therefore, not a choice between studying the effect of the media on vulnerable children's minds and a competent child audience's manipulation of new media technology. These perspectives have different emphases in the study of children's use of the media. Essentialism emphasizes the text and its effects on an audience; constructivism emphasizes the viewer's interpretational strategies in relation to specific media texts, while contextualism emphasizes the context of children's use of the media. In this sense, they are complementary perspectives. Yet, it is important to bear in mind that the perspectives are linked with particular images of the child audience as meaning-influenced (essentialism), meaning-constructing (constructivism) and meaning-structured (contextualism). In other words, conducting child media studies demands a certain level of reflexivity as concerns the applied theories and their implicit notions of children. Reflexivity is a central concept in recent qualitative methodology. It calls for awareness of theoretical assumptions and the importance of language and pre-understanding, all of which constitute major determinants of interpretation. Furthermore, reflection turns the attention inwards, toward the person of the researcher, the relevant research community, society as a whole, intellectual and cultural traditions, and the importance of language and narrative (the form of presentation) in the research context. In their book *Reflexive Methodology – New vistas for qualitative Research* (Alvesson & Skjoldberg 2000), Mats Alvesson and Kaj Skjoldberg defined the concept of reflexivity as interpretation of interpretation. They understand reflexivity as a critical evaluation of the interpretations made in a certain study and of the empirical basis of these interpretations – an evaluation that should be made before forming any opinions on 'reality' as such. The research process constitutes a (re)construction of the social reality in which researchers both interact with the agents researched and, continually actively interpreting, create images for themselves and for others: images that selectively highlight certain claims as to how conditions and processes can be understood, thus suppressing

alternative interpretations. One of the most important tasks in reflexive research is, therefore, to reconsider why particular perspectives and constructions of the social reality are preferred. The systematic interrelations between views of the child and views of the media offer an explanation to the question: why have particular views of the media been preferred in the study of children and media? Because they relate to conventional images of the child. This is clearly the case with the comprehensive amount of effect research, with its emphasis on media effects on children's behaviour or attitude (e.g., Werner 1986; von Feilitzen 1998). These studies can be easily related to notions of the child as essentially different from adults, for example as more exposed to harmful media with detrimental consequences for their socialisation. Reception research has also gradually gained a prominent position in the study of children's media use (e.g., Rydin 1996; Tønnesen 1999; Povlsen 1999). The notion, implied in the research perspective, of viewers as meaning-making agents in relation to media texts is in many instances in good keeping with the constructivist program of Piaget and Vygotsky. The view of children as actively engaging in their own cognitive development was already part of conventional knowledge and institutional practice. Psychological constructivism therefore supplied the intellectual and cultural context for extending reception studies to include the child audience. However, the recent tendency in media research to study media use as interpretative processes embedded in wider social and cultural contexts has only to a limited extent influenced child media studies. This raises the question: why do child media researchers not take up this perspective as readily as studies of media effects and reception? The so-called "ethnographic turn" in media studies calls for an audience-centred perspective instead of the text-centred perspective of the reception studies (Drotner 1993). Ethnographic media studies are essentially studies of everyday life with a focus on how media are integrated into the social and cultural life of ordinary people. This view of the media does not *a priori* exclude children. However, it implies a much more comprehensive notion of the viewers as not only cognitive agents, as in the psychological constructivism, but as social and cultural agents as well. This notion of the child is not already part of a well-established understanding of children in society. It is not part of the conventional wisdom; it is only gradually beginning to influence institutional practice and it can still ignite heated debates among scholars. Furthermore a contextual perspective on children's media use conflicts with the well-established assumption that children live a life outside of society, in their own secluded territories of play and preparation for adult life. Clearly such an understanding does not embrace studies that understand the child audience as largely shaped by the structures of society. In an academic context that tends to segregate adult's and children's cultural domains, the concept of generation is also at risk for becoming irrelevant. Because only if childhood and children's culture are seen as structural categories of any society is it truly important to examine the relationship between generations. Gen-

eration is, as argued above, a key concept in understanding how children are established as an audience with specific features setting it apart from other audiences.

The overall point of this chapter has been to argue that the preference for particular perspectives and interpretations in child media studies obviously helps to maintain certain understandings of the child audience. An important task for contemporary child media studies is, therefore, to bear in mind that they should never study children's media use as such, but always employ a theoretically based perspective on this issue. A theoretically based perspective is, however, not just a limitation of our conception of social reality, but also allows us to understand and express a comprehensible opinion about this reality at all. The point of this chapter is, therefore, not to overwhelm child media studies with restrictions on drawing any conclusions about how children use the media, but to turn the field's attention to the theoretical, linguistic, political and cultural context that makes certain representations of the media-using child appear as "natural", in order to increase the variety of perspectives that can legitimately be applied to the study of children's media use.

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Chapter 2

Five-Year-Olds' Fascination for Television

A Comparative Study

Karin Hake

Much of the public debate has focused on worries about television and its effects on viewers. A central concern has been that of possible negative effects. This attitude has to a large extent determined the research agenda regarding children and television. Such a perspective can, at best, obscure how complex this field of research is, and prevent us from exploring in greater depth what children themselves have to say about their relationship with television (Buckingham, 1993). Another prominent perspective is children's media-use and preferences. Further theoretical perspectives have focused upon experience and understanding of television. Such a tradition moves beyond the question of use, and focuses on the meaning created between the text and the viewer. The prolific American TV series *Sesame Street* contributed to this shift in focus. Such a perspective brings about increased interest in qualitative media research in general and reception studies in particular. Some of these studies are conducted within the framework of 'cultural studies'. In 'cultural studies' the focus is on the varied 'readings' individuals construct from the content and how they make sense of it. Tannis M. MacBeth (1996) also focused on the dynamic aspects of the relationship, between the child and the media in which children are active in making sense of what they watch. David Buckingham, who has been eminent in the field of research on children's use and understanding of television (1993; 1996), also stressed this point of view. Within the Nordic countries, the following qualitative studies have highlighted the child's own perspective: *Sesame for Norwegian children*¹ (Åm, 1991), *TV-viewing in a socialising perspective* (Thingstad, 1994) *Making sense of TV-narratives. Children's reading of a fairy tale* (Rydin, 1996) *TV – the electronic family member* (Løngreen & Holm Sørensen, 1996) and *Sesame to The Television Text* (Seip Tønnessen, 1999).

My central concern in this respect is not the effects of television, but the ways in which children read and make sense of it. Researchers have had a tendency to focus on meaning, while neglecting the central question of 'pleasure' (Buck-

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ingham, 1993). Attempts to study the role of television in children's affective development have generally been quite inadequate, according to Dorr (1982).

Buckingham maintained that very little attention is paid to the diverse ways in which children make sense of what they watch. He further stated that there has been comparatively little research on the emotional dimensions of children's relationship with television (Buckingham, 1993). My study focuses on children's reception seen from both a cognitive and an affective point of view: What reflections and emotions do these programmes evoke? This is a comparative study focusing on children's fascination for two programmes within the same genre; programmes that are archetypal of two TV channels with different purposes: one being a public service channel, and the other a commercial channel.

Theoretical Concepts

The theory of schemata is applied as one of the main concepts to explain the dynamic relationship between the child and television and how the child encounters television with assumptions and expectations that will form understanding and fascination. According to cognitive theory within the context of television (Høijer, 1992; Berry & Asamen, 1993), people create meaning using schemata – a set of expectations created through earlier experiences – both in a general sense and specifically through television. These schemata are formed partly through interaction with the text, and partly through earlier experiences and structures that are evoked while watching. Schemata theory emphasizes our active construction of reality. The young viewers in their role as 'active constructors', constitute a fundamental dimension underlying the design of this study.

Fascination is another central concept. It is applied to characterize how children experience the TV-programmes. The concept is borrowed from Fausing (1977 and 1993). Fausing, among others, described fascination as 'encountering aesthetic experiences' and fascination in relation to play as 'the lustful panic'.² Fascination includes elements of excitement, delight and titillation, and at the same time a certain degree of hesitance, but nevertheless enjoyment. It includes attraction as well as gleeful terror. The concept therefore includes an ambivalence: A sentiment or attitude that involves enthusiasm, attraction and /or a tense, sceptical attitude as well as a certain reluctance towards impressions.

Buckingham discussed 'the ambiguous pleasure' (Buckingham, 1993; 139) in order to describe such an ambivalence. Cognitive and affective elements are often considered to be separate elements in the reception process (Dorr, 1982). Buckingham (1993 and 1996) used the concepts of both 'pleasure' and 'unpleasure' in relation to the children's TV-experiences. These concepts include both pleasure and terrifying experiences, and may result in considerable ambivalence. Both pleasure and terrifying experiences are dimensions included in the concept of fascination, as is the case in this study.

Identification is also relevant in order to illustrate the affective elements of TV-experience. Identification describes a relationship that is established between the viewer and a media figure. Rydin (1996) described identification as the viewer's emotional involvement with a character or a situation. It is a form of emotional involvement in which the viewer is attracted to a character or a situation that reinforces the viewer's emotional reactions. This partly implies that the viewer identifies with a mass media character, or that the viewer wishes that he or she were this person. Often there is a combination between the two (von Feilitzen et al., 1989).

Key questions:

1. Is there a difference between children's fascination for a commercial and a public service programme?
2. What are the characteristics of a text that children are highly attracted to, and how does this compare to the text that children are *not* attracted to?
3. Confronted with both a public service programme and a commercial TV-programme, which do the children choose?
4. What is the relationship between fascination, understanding and the children's preferences?
5. To what extent is there a correspondence between children's and parents' evaluation of the programmes?

The Text

The empirical basis of the study was a children's TV-programme from the commercial TV-channel, TV3, and another from the Norwegian public service channel, NRK. Test panels from both NRK and TV3 chose three programmes within the same genre from their own channel. It was from these programmes that the final programme selection for NRK and TV3 would be made. The test panels ensured that the two programmes were typical of the children's programmes shown on these two channels. There were numerous reasons behind the final selection decisions made (the programmes being *Spot and his Grandparents go to the Carnival* and *Beethoven*). The test panel from NRK had the following reasons for choosing *Spot*:

The programme was the one most relevant for the target group, because it referred to children's everyday life. Both the dramaturgical scheme and the story constituted a programme that is close to children's everyday life. It gives an opportunity for identification and recognition, showing the children how to solve conflicts in their real life.³

TV3's test panel stated the following reasons for choosing *Beethoven*:

The programme is suitable both for the youngest children and the older ones, up to 12 years. It is aimed at a broad target group, but it also appeals to the youngest children. It is not too advanced for them. The two other programmes that were discussed were too intense and rather frightening for preschool children. Beethoven is typical for TV3's target group, and is neutral as to male/female sex in the sense that it appeals both to boys and girls. Beethoven is based on a film that is well-known to Norwegian children.⁴

Both programmes were produced for scheduling during an established children's television time. They were approximately similar in length, were both animated films, and both had dogs as their main characters. They are well known to many children in Norway through films and books. In this way, possible differences in fascination may be attributed to differences in experience and not to differences in genre, length and main characters.

The Television Programmes

Spot and his grandparents go to the Carnival (NRK): When Spot arrives at Grandma and Grandpa's house on carnival day, they have a special surprise waiting for him: in the shed is a real fire engine, the one that Grandpa used to work with when he was a Chief Fireman. Spot and all of his friends are going for a ride on it with Grandma and Grandpa in the carnival parade.

Before they get that far, however, there are some important rescues to be made. Grandma's cat gets stuck in a tree. She was frightened by the monkey blowing the trumpet. And the brass band's float breaks down. Fortunately Spot comes up with an idea and everyone reaches the carnival parade in time. The carnival parade was the highlight of a perfect day, the best day Grandma and Grandpa could have planned. Grandma got a prize because she had made the best cake for the carnival festival. Grandma gave Spot the prize because he had saved the day.⁵

Beethoven (TV3) consists of two different episodes: *Dear George* and *The Pound* which the children watch without interruption. In the first episode, *Dear George*, Beethoven is doing several tricks. George, his master, had given him a ball when he was a puppy so he should not feel lonely. Every time he goes to sleep, he has to have the ball with him. But he has lost it in a bin. Beethoven cannot sleep alone. He wants to sleep with George, his 'boss'. George tries to go to sleep, but Beethoven wakes him up several times, making George very angry. Beethoven tries several tricks to get indoors to George and he runs away from the dog yard all the time. All the obstacles that George makes to keep Beethoven in the yard are of no use. Beethoven always finds ways of getting into George's house. At last, George is trying to

fall asleep, but he is not able to do this before he lies down beside Beethoven. In the end, Beethoven and George sleep happily together.

In the second episode, *The Pound*, the dog Sparkey is caught by the dog warden and put into the pound. Sparkey's friends are looking for him and finally they find him in the pound. They try to set him free. One of the dogs gnaws at the chain on the door, while a hamster creeps through the letterbox and opens the door using the door handle. All the dogs pass the dog warden and find their way out of the prison. When the dogs are free, they are happily gnawing bones outside on the lawn.⁶

Method

20 five-year-old children, 10 boys and 10 girls participated in the study. They represented ordinary TV-viewing children in Norway. Norwegian preschool children have a relatively homogenous viewing pattern (Hake, 1998). The five-year-olds were selected because they are well-established TV viewers, and basically have a more homogenous background than older children who have gained experience of a wider variety of social arenas. Neither of the programmes had been on the air earlier, and as such had not been watched by any of the participating children. The key questions were operationalized through three different methodological approaches:

1. Qualitative interviews
2. Video-observation
3. Questionnaire to the parents concerning their evaluation of the programmes. In addition, 3 parents were interviewed individually.

The Qualitative Interview

The qualitative interview was conducted in a relatively open-ended, semi-structured way. The introduction was 'Tell me about what you just watched. What was it all about?' This reflects a non-directive technique whereby the children may reconstruct what they experienced as personally most relevant. In this way we might uncover the children's 'immediate fascination' – what they immediately present as the first theme in their free reconstruction of the story. 'A guided reconstruction' (Rydin, 1996) that leads the children through the story from one sequence to another followed 'the free reconstruction.' At the end of the interview the children were asked the following question:

'Now we are going to pretend that it is your birthday. Then we pretend that I give you a birthday present. I want to give you either a Beethoven videocas-

sette or a Spot videocassette – a Spot videocassette or a Beethoven videocassette. Which one do you prefer?’

It was an important point to link this question to a concrete, well-known situation such as a birthday present. In this way it was easier for five-year-old children to relate to the situation than if they had been confronted with an abstract choice.

Video-Observation

Video-observation gives us data on the experiential level and highlights the children's body language, facial expressions and mimicry. The aim of this methodological strategy is to go beyond verbal expressions, to reveal 'the unspoken dimension' (Hake, 1997). To interpret children's fascination for a programme only on the basis of qualitative interviews would be to underestimate the complicated process of reception. When children are asked to reconstruct a story, we ask them to remember, understand and make inferences – a cognitive process. Children do not only retell a story, they reconstruct on the basis of what they experience as most significant. The affective dimensions of the viewing experience are much more difficult to articulate. Therefore video-observation includes areas of experience not necessarily explored through interviews. The younger the participants are, the more important it becomes to use other methods in addition to qualitative interviews, as younger participants do not have the vocabulary with which to express their experiences in an adequate and comprehensive manner.

The videotapes last for approximately 50 minutes and give a full view of the children's body language and facial expressions while they are watching. The tapes reflect a rather varied picture of the children's reactions. Some children show little variation in facial expressions and body language and are very concentrated in the viewing situation. Others give a more varied impression. They smile, frown, lie down or leave the screen for a while. Attempting to interpret certain facial expressions as an indication of fascination (or absence of such), involves a significant amount of subjective interpretation. The researcher must be very sensitive in order to capture even very small nuances.

Reliability and Validity

In the complete report (Hake, 1999), I discussed several questions concerning reliability and validity. In this article, I will focus on two of them.

Reflective analysis and interpretation of the results are elements that may strengthen the reliability of the study (Heap, 1988). In this study, such reflective work is achieved through discussing the analysis and interpretations

with a co-researcher. This is particularly relevant with the video-observations, for which the subjective factor may be strong. The two researchers' respective categorization and interpretation of the results correspond to a large extent. This may be an indication of inter-rater reliability.

In this study I find it especially important to reflect upon my identity as a researcher working in NRK. Have my analysis and interpretation of results been influenced by this position and has this caused a possible selective interpretation of the results? I have tried to counteract this by continually reflecting upon "surprising" results and adopting a critical outlook on analysis – to counteract the possibility of biased interpretations. As Kvale says: 'To validate isin general to play the devil's advocate towards his or her own findings' (Kvale, 1996; 242).

Data triangulation: It will strengthen the validity of the results if different approaches are applied when considering the same questions. For instance, data from qualitative interviews may be compared with other sets of data, in this case video-observations. Observational data may bring about revised interpretations of the interviews, or vice versa. Observational data may reinforce or weaken information derived from interviews and may give additional information that is not easily obtained through another method.

Analysis

The interviews were analysed as a whole, but also on the basis of the following categories: Focus, understanding, narrative style and identification.

Focus: What do the children experience as the most important themes in the story? This is reflected by which of the themes or sequences they spontaneously retell and most frequently mention in their retelling.

Understanding: To what extent do the children understand the main points in the story expressed in their retelling or guided reconstruction? Understanding is recorded when the children described the main points and were able to express the relationship between cause and effect.

The three main points in *Spot* are:

1. That the cat was frightened and got stuck in the tree because the monkey played the trumpet.
2. Spot saved the day because he used the fire engine to bring his friends to the carnival in time.
3. Grandma got a prize because she had baked the best cake at the carnival day and Grandma gave Spot the prize because he had saved the day.

Beethoven has two main points in each episode.

In episode 1: *Dear George*:

1. When Beethoven goes to sleep, he needs the ball that George gave to him when he was a puppy. Beethoven loses the ball in the bin. Therefore, he cannot sleep because he feels lonely without the ball.
2. George is unable to fall asleep until he lies down beside Beethoven.

In episode 2: *The Pound*:

1. How Sparkey disappeared because he was caught by the dog warden.
2. The process of how the dogs rescued Sparkey through the help of his friends.

Narrative style: To what extent do the children retell the story as a whole or parts of the story coherently – as opposed to describing them only by means of key words?

Identification: Which elements – themes, persons or acts – seem to arouse special involvement and emotional identification? This is highlighted by looking at the interviews as a whole: by focused themes and by the children's reasoning about preferences.

Preference: The children's ultimate programme preference was analysed based on the answers to the final question in the interview about which programme they preferred.

Video-observations – level of fascination: The children's reactions, classified on the basis of a general impression of the videotapes, were categorized according to level of fascination:

- High level of fascination: The children are absorbed and concentrated, commenting, showing pleasure and are open to impressions. Alternatively, the children seem to be closed to the impressions and are tense and sceptical.
- Intermediate level of fascination: The children concentrate and are involved, but show uneasiness and become gradually bored as time elapses.
- Low level of fascination: The children are attentive but not involved. They show some motoric activity, are sceptical and drop out now and then.

Questionnaire – the parents' perspective: The parents were asked to choose between *Spot* or *Beethoven*, on behalf of their own child, and state which programme they thought their child would choose. They were also asked to reflect upon these answers. Furthermore they were asked to evaluate the two programmes in relation to three target groups; 3-4 years, 5-6 years and 6 years and older.

Main Findings

This section presents the main findings regarding how the two programmes spoke to the viewers.

Focus

In the reconstruction of both programmes, a clear majority of the children focused explicitly on themes such as *problem solving*, *coping*, *succeeding* and working hard to be *competent*. In both programmes, the child identified with the Spot character as the hero; he succeeds. Spot finds solutions before the adults manage to do so, and he receives praise. Beethoven wins and gets his way. This implies a certain opposition to authorities. The conflict between the dog and the authorities is underlined very clearly with strong visual and auditory effects. Beethoven copes and solves problems with the help of good friends. This is a story about solidarity, friendship and helpfulness in a difficult situation. Both in the children's spontaneous retelling (the free reconstruction – by which they conveyed their 'very first fascination'), and also in the guided reconstruction, the theme *coping* was very predominant. Also when the children gave the reason for their preference, themes such as *helping*, *coping* and *succeeding* were predominant. Coping and problem solving are important developmental tasks for five-year-olds. They identified with Spot and Beethoven and adopted their perspectives. The image of a hero that is coping, mirrors the challenges that a child encounters in everyday-life. The frame of reference – their schemata – that they had in mind when reading the programme, connects to central themes in the programmes.

Another of the children's central focus points was on themes that deal with the affective components, such as aggression and events related to conflicts. These dimensions are very distinct in the episodes of *Beethoven* – the programme from the commercial channel. When retelling, the children used words such as 'angry, naughty, mad' to characterize his image. These elements are clearly presented not only in the story itself, and in the dialogue, but also in the visual and auditory effects. This is expressed through shrieks and howling and resignation from the adults because of Beethoven's tricks.

Understanding

Spot: 15 out of 20 children understood the points about the cat being frightened because the monkey played the trumpet. Nearly all, 19 out of 20, understood the point about Spot saving the day by helping his friends. Only few – three children – understood the point about why Spot got the award. The first and the second points are presented in a very concrete manner, and the connection between cause and effect is clearly visualized. This is

probably the main reason why so many children understood these points. But it may also be explained by identification. Elements that fascinate children and with which children identify, also facilitate understanding or motivation for understanding (von Feilitzen et al., 1989).

Beethoven: About half of the children understood the point about the ball (12) and the point about 'sleeping together' (13). Nearly all the children (18) understood how the dog was caught and the majority (16) described how his friends rescued him. It seems that where the points are very concrete, it was much easier for children to understand and express. For example, points about 'a sleeping problem' may be experienced by the children as very subtle and abstract. This may be the reason why fewer children were able to explain this point.

Narrative Style

The children's capacity to coherently retell the stories showed great variation. Some children only answered with key words, others reconstructed the story in a very lively manner including many details. It did not seem that the programmes themselves facilitated a different narrative style. Half of the children (11) reconstructed both *Spot* and *Beethoven* coherently. In both cases it seemed that it was the children's general capacity for memory and fluent expression, that formed the basis of their narrative style. Each child either retold the story using key words or gave a coherent presentation of the story.

Identification

The situations and characters with which the children identified, were revealed by looking at the children's focus, understanding and the manner in which they expressed their programme preference. An overall perspective of the interviews about *Spot* revealed that the children focused upon coping. Spot 'saves the day' and he also gets a prize, being acknowledged by the adults for solving a problem. In the way the children reconstructed the story about Spot, they focused upon Spot being the hero. Concepts such as 'prize', 'she won', 'they managed it' reflected that the children identified with both Spot and Grandma.

The children also identified with the relationship between the main characters: the grandparents and Spot. However, there were relatively few that explicitly focused on these scenes.

The children identified with Beethoven being naughty, rebelling against authorities and confronting angry adults. Beethoven is testing boundaries, just as the five-year-old does in his or her everyday life. The children were excited and fascinated by this and the tension that follows. Here are elements of identification – the children recognized and identified with such situations.

In contrast to this, *Spot* presents a storyline of harmony. There are idyllic relations free from conflict, and there are no exciting situations. The plot is to a large extent predictable. In the *Beethoven* programme, the children experienced exciting conflicts, which reach beyond a harmonic viewing experience.

Preference – Which Programme Do They Chose?

When asked which videocassette they would prefer to receive as a present, 16 children (8 boys and 8 girls) chose Beethoven. Nearly all the children (18) gave a prompt and clear answer to the question. Two children answered 'don't know' at first. But when the question was repeated, both expressed a distinct preference and made a clear choice. One of these said 'both of them' and thereby expressing a certain ambivalence. Another child expressed her ambivalent attitude in another way. She first chose *Spot* and this was also her final choice. But while reflecting she hesitated a little and said 'maybe the dogs' referring to *Beethoven*. 'Both were nice,' she said. There were elements in *Beethoven* which fascinated her, but after a total evaluation she nevertheless selected *Spot*.

Children's Fascination – A Summary of Qualitative Data

What is the relationship between fascination, understanding and the children's preferences? The videotapes showed a pattern of fascination in two different ways: Either the children showed a relaxed body language, receptive to what they were being presented on the screen, and seemingly enjoying the experience. In contrast, others were fascinated but close and tense. Auditory and visual stimuli seem to be experienced as intrusive.

The children's reactions, classified on the basis of a general impression of the videotapes, are categorized according to three different levels of fascination as listed earlier.

There was no absolute correspondence between what the children understood, the level of fascination and their programme preference. However, for some children, there was correspondence between what they understood, their level of fascination and their programme preference. For others there was no correspondence between the level of fascination, how much they understood or expressed what they understood, and what they chose. When we compare data from the interviews and the video-observations, we find many different patterns concerning how the children experienced the two programmes in relation to their choice.

To illustrate this, two cases representing different modes of reception are presented, varying from a 'logical' mode of reception where there is a correspondence between level of fascination and preference, to a mode of reception where there is incoherence between level of fascination and preference.

David: David is highly fascinated by *Beethoven*. He is deeply concentrated while he watches, and is eagerly looking forward to what is going to happen. He hides behind hands and knees and may seem a little anxious. The programme seems to challenge him. He understands all the plots. His fascination with *Spot* is on an intermediate level and he seems to be in another mood when watching *Beethoven*. When he watches *Spot*, he seems engaged and secure. He is open and relaxed, but gradually seems to become bored. He understands two out of three main points in *Spot*. David prefers *Beethoven*. Here we find a logical pattern: This child is mostly fascinated by *Beethoven* and prefers this even if, (or maybe that is just why), this programme elicits excitement, which is very close to provoking anxiety. When he watches *Spot*, he is tense in a different way, and his fascination is on an intermediate level.

Maria: Maria is highly fascinated by *Spot*. She is open, relaxed and concentrated while she watches and seems to enjoy herself. She understands all the main points in this story. While she watches *Beethoven*, she is fascinated at a lower level. She moves from being an intense viewer to lacking in concentration while watching. She drops out, and seems to be uncomfortable with the situation. She understands two out of four points. Maria prefers *Beethoven*. In this case there is little correspondence between the level of fascination and what she prefers. Maria understands *Spot* most thoroughly and is highly fascinated by this programme. Nevertheless she chooses *Beethoven*. It seems as if she experiences some sort of excitement when she does not feel comfortable, and is attracted to this. The pleasure she experiences while watching *Spot*, does not seem to be sufficient for her to choose this programme over *Beethoven*. There are elements in *Beethoven* that are stronger determinants than a secure and understandable viewing experience.

The Parents' Perspective

The parents were asked to choose between *Spot* or *Beethoven*, and, on behalf of their own child, to state which programme they thought their child would choose. They were also asked to reflect upon these answers. Furthermore, they were asked to evaluate the two programmes in relation to the three target groups; three to four years, five to six years, and six years and older. In addition the individual interviews with three parents gave a general, but more detailed picture of the aims and content of children's TV-programmes from the parents' point of view.

The majority of the parents thought that *Beethoven* is far more appealing to their child than *Spot*. When we look at the correspondence between what the parents chose as their favourite programme and what their child chose, there are eight parent/child pairs for whom the parents' and the child's choice do not correspond. In all these cases the lack of correspondence is one-sided: *All these eight parents chose Spot, while their child chose Beethoven.*

This study indicates that in a number of cases the parents gave priority to other dimensions, and emphasized other criteria when expressing their opinion about 'good' TV-programmes for children. This finding contrasts with the findings concerning the children's fascination. The parents chose differently on behalf of their children, and the parental choices contrasted with the children's own choices.

It is especially striking that when the parents described *Spot*, they emphasized that this is a story about 'good values and high moral values.' TV-programmes for children should, according to the parents, have a positive normative function. In addition, the programme ought to be secure and non-threatening. The children stressed other criteria: The gloomy and sinister elements, and the visual and auditory complexity engage the children. This is more important for them than idyllic harmony. It seems to challenge the children to receive impressions that are not just simple to understand and comfortable

Discussion

The children's reactions to the *Beethoven* programme do not only reflect immediate pleasure. Rather, they also reflect what Buckingham (1996) includes in his 'pleasure-concept': Excitement and horror, in addition to delight.

Many people – including children – actively choose to watch or read things that they know will upset or frighten them, and the sadness or fear is often inseparable from the pleasure. (Buckingham, 1996; 3).

This is in accord with Fausing's (1977) concept of fascination – i.e. an attraction that includes joy as well as scepticism, and may even include strong dislike.

The majority of the children preferred *Beethoven*, even if it implies some sort of ambivalent attitudes and negative emotions. The children's choice, and the way in which they expressed their preference, were very clear. This was to me a rather surprising finding, which may have implications for our knowledge about the relation between children's fascination and their ultimate choice. Despite the aggressive emotions that are presented strongly and very distinctly, such as in the *Beethoven* programme, there may be a positive experience to be gained from the acting out of aggression. It might even be a form of cathartic experience and, despite the conflicts, the programme has a happy end. Stories such as this are in contrast to those in which the content and form are harmonious, cautious and full of trust, and in which the children are not exposed to rather dubious and exciting experiences like those encountered in *Beethoven*.

Bruno Bettelheim, (1979) who has worked in particular with children's relation to fairy tales, stated the following:

If a story is going to succeed in sustaining children's attention it has to be amusing and call upon curiosity. But to enrich life it has to engage their fantasy, help them to develop their reasoning and straighten out their emotions, it has to respond to their fears and expectations, acknowledge their difficulties and at the same time suggest solutions to problems they may have. It must, in short, at the same time, include all aspects of the child's personality (Bettelheim, 1979; 11).

The children's perspective on these two programmes shows that the *Beethoven* programme corresponds to different parts of their emotional register than does *Spot*. *Beethoven* deals with emotions, primarily aggression, that evoke a more intense response and fascination than *Spot*. Experiencing strong excitement and horror may relate to their own fear. This provides an opportunity to feel scared, to experience emotional arousal and to experience intense emotions. Perhaps such experiences are missing in our modern, very structured everyday life – even for young children.

'Counter Culture'

A Danish pilot study presented the concept of *counter culture*: Children are expected to comply with attitudes and values in the family, but in practice they act beyond the norms that their parents find acceptable. Children's media use is expressed through the knowledge of cartoons and commercials that the parents reject. Tufte and Christensen stated as follows:

In the restricted surroundings the commercial media culture will function as some sort of counter culture (Tufte and Christensen, 1998; 61).

Furthermore, Tufte and Christensen maintained that there is some sort of dynamics between children's culture, the adult culture and the media culture in the family. The children's media culture may function either as some sort of counter culture to an adult culture, or as a parallel culture to an adult culture. One may also take this aspect of counter culture further: Is children's own culture, i.e. their play, in itself a sort of counter culture compared to the adult world?

Five-year-old children are still at the stage where parents can regulate what they want their children to watch and, if possible, which impressions they want them to be protected from. In this study, the children are separated from the parents' spheres while watching these programmes. In a situation such as this, the children have the opportunity to express their own views more freely. The children seem to stress criteria of fascination other than those of their parents, and in this way they are creating their own alternative media culture – a counter culture. This is in contrast to an adult media culture that the adults implicitly or explicitly try to impart. Is it possible that

there is a silent and implicit dissemination of attitudes from parents to children concerning an 'acceptable' media culture, which dictates what the child 'ought to' choose to watch? Is the child socialized into certain ways of thinking about media? According to Haldar 'There are always certain ideologies behind the way we behave towards children' (1996; 177).

The parents want their children to be protected from frightening experiences, aggressive emotions, aggressive fantasies and unpredictable excitement. At the same time, they are well aware that speed, excitement and devious elements fascinate the children. In contrast, the 'careful and nice' story-elements and form-elements are precisely those which the children do not find very engaging. It is primarily heightened emotions, excitement and horror that elicit intense fascination. This study indicates that children are highly fascinated by strong excitement and horror, even though they seem to experience a certain ambivalence. They seem willing to 'take risks' and not simply protect themselves from unpleasant experiences. The question which needs to be posed is whether children should be confronted with elements of aggression and conflicts, or alternatively whether they should experience only nice stories and good-natured fantasies. Being confronted with unpredictable excitement is part of life and of childhood. Perhaps children have a greater capacity to handle risks and suspense than adults often think and that adults primarily want to protect the young viewers.

The concept of 'counter culture' may also be connected with discussions about constructions of childhood. TV-programmes for young children are changing, a change that not only tells us about our TV-programmes – but also about our representations of children. How does the media organize a child's world? How do the media messages change? How do children change? Understanding the modern child largely involves understanding how the child relates to his or her media landscape. How do children read television and which images of children do TV-producers present (Frønes, 1998)?

The old familiar sentimental notion of children as innocent and vulnerable (Buckingham, 1998) corresponds with many of the parent's view of children in this study: The parents want to protect their children from action and aggressive content presented on TV. They want their children to be a protected audience. Harmony and happiness should dominate.

Childhood is constructed as separate (conceptually and physically) from the adult world (James & Prout, 1990). The texts which adults produce for children represent an adult construction of childhood. Buckingham (1998; 47) maintained that 'within public service children have traditionally been a protected audience and critics are increasingly asking whether the market will be able to provide for their needs in a multi-channel commercial future.' He further stated that 'there is now an acute tension between how we construct children and how children construct themselves – between what children want to be and what we adults want them to be' (ibid.; 50). Perhaps this study can contribute to a broader understanding of how children construct themselves, how they read media messages and of adult notions of children's reception process.

Conclusion

It is hoped that findings from this study will have a wider value than experiences from case studies. They cannot be generalized to other programmes, but they can form the basis for understanding how children may experience other programmes (Høijer, 1986). We can consider these findings in an analytical manner and as such they can constitute a tool for further understanding of children's readings of television. However, the data in this study must be interpreted with caution, and we cannot draw substantial conclusions outside this context.

This study has focused upon two different TV-programmes, one from a commercial channel and one from a public broadcasting channel. If we look back about 10 years, the differences between programmes from these two channels were quite clear. Programmes which were aired on a commercial channel, would not have been accepted on a public service channel. Today the boundaries are more blurred. There are examples of programmes which could have been broadcasted by either channel. There has been increasing similarity between programmes in terms of style, e.g., use of animation techniques and especially pace. On the other hand, there are still examples of programmes that are aired on commercial channels that are not accepted by a public service channel. A current example is *Pokemon*, an animated Japanese programme series that was rejected by NRK because of 'a large-scaled commercialisation and a rather low-quality story'⁷.

Nevertheless, findings from this study may indicate that there still may be rather considerable differences between the two TV-channels in terms of how they look at children's TV-programmes. This may partly be explained by the different purposes of a commercial and a public service TV-channel. However, it may also be explained by the possibility that TV3 seems to offer programmes with more action and excitement. This might imply a different attitude towards the target group concerning what sort of content is appropriate for young children. This attitude may, implicitly or explicitly, be in contrast to that of NRK. It may also imply that a commercial channel like TV3 has a slightly different image of the young audience as compared to NRK. Perhaps a public service channel still keeps more of a protectionist notion of childhood than does a commercial channel, even if we keep in mind the different purposes of the two channels. It may also imply another attitude towards where limits should be set for unacceptable horror and excitement. In this study, NRK represents an attitude that focuses on security and harmony, while TV3 to a larger extent presents dramatic and conflict-focused content.

It may be relevant to ask: To what extent should children be protected from such experiences? Should they, instead, have the freedom to experience a world that includes insecurity and excitement? Perhaps it is a challenge to cope with experiences that are on the edge of what can be tolerated, and to alternate between excitement and release of suspense, experiencing 'a happy end'.

In the case of those parents who stressed that their children should receive secure and harmonious TV-experiences, which they think are represented by NRK, this implies that their children obtain experiences that the parents know the children can cope with and tolerate. Therefore the parents may consider the NRK programmes as 'secure experiences'. The programmes from TV3 consisting of elements that are more unpredictable, complicated and intense may be more demanding from the parent's point of view. This may be the case because the parents may feel that these programmes might imply the need for parental control. In these circumstances, the parents have to form their own opinions of the programmes and choose on behalf of their children.

Enlightenment or Entertainment?

A normative perspective was not included here, nor was this an aim of the study. Even if it focuses on children's perspectives and reception, adults still ought to discuss which programmes they want for their children. It is of utmost importance to listen to children's voices, but this does not imply that they alone should decide what to watch. In a policy debate and a decision-making process, this form of research may enable children's voices to be heard. The parents may be threatened by the fact that their children are fascinated by and focus on other elements than they themselves do. These differences may also be intertwined with the fact that children and parents have different views about the function of TV. Several parents in this study stressed that TV ought to bring important messages to the child and to have an educational and normative function. This also implies that they want their children to understand these messages. The children possibly consider TV to be a medium for entertainment, where fascination and engagement are important, and where messages are subordinate.

Knowledge about children and their everyday life is often knowledge about children, as adults perceive them. This type of research, where there is a cross reference between the children's and the parents' perspectives, may constitute a tool for understanding and sub-dividing the concept 'a good TV-programme for children.' The concept is incomplete if we only look at it from the adult's perspective. It not only deals with preventing negative elements, but also combines analysis of the children's patterns of engagement with the adults' views on what makes 'a good TV-story'.

A research design like this might have the potential to enable us to study more deeply how children experience certain programmes and which elements are fascinating, especially focusing on the more emotional aspects of the reception process.

Childhood and children's social relationships and culture are worthy of study in their own right, and not just in respect to their social construction by adults.

This means that children are and must be seen as actively involved in the construction and determination of their own social lives' (James & Prout, 1990; 8).

This study may contribute to give children a more distinct voice and thereby further a more multi-faceted image of the child audience. This may imply a challenge towards rethinking some of the possible stereotypes that influence policy-making in producing children's television.

Notes

1. The English titles of Åm (1991), Thingstad (1994) and Løngreen and Holm Sørensen, 1996) are the author's own translations.
2. This and the previous phrase from Fausing are the author's translations of the original Danish.
3. Marit Løvdaal et al., NRK (1998; personal communication).
4. Ellen Christensen, TV3 (1998; personal communication).
5. King Rollo Films (1997) *Spot and his Grandparents Go to the Carnival*, synopsis.
6. TV3 (1996) *Beethoven*, synopsis.
7. Elin Raustøl, NRK (2000; personal communication).

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Chapter 3

Meaning-Making in a Changing Media Culture

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For as long as people have communicated through texts – in the broadest sense of the word: pictures, words, songs, etc. – we have met the challenge of interpretation. Humankind is characterized by its search for meaning. This is not to say that we find any text meaningful, or that different people will derive the same meaning from a given text. But the basic assumption is that we approach texts with a fundamental expectation for meaning, and that the recipient takes an active part in creating this meaning when encountering texts. Meaning in this sense can take many forms, emotional and aesthetic as well as cognitive.

Communication through mediation, be it in writing or images, is characterized by a fundamental division in time and space between the context of production and the context of reception. The *meaning* derived from the text is not necessarily the same in these two contexts. That is one reason why media researchers have focused more and more on the receiving side of media communication.

This chapter will start with a brief presentation of the theoretical basis for such a focus on media reception. From a background of European hermeneutics, a text-oriented theory of reception concentrates on how one should analyse a text in order to reveal how it invites the response of the recipient. The recipient, on the other hand, is situated in a context with certain conventions about how a text should be interpreted. This double perspective on the meaning-making process of reception will then be illustrated through an empirical study of how pre-school children in Norway responded to the Norwegian version of the international series *Sesame Street*.

Meaning

Our starting point is that meaning is not a fixed entity, contained in the text. Meaning is more than content; it develops in a complicated interaction be-

tween the text and the recipient. Drawing an analogy to language acquisition, it is clear that knowing a language involves more than vocabulary. Linguistic competence also includes knowing the rules for how these words can be used, varied and combined in sentences and texts. The same logic applies when the signs of the text are images, movements, and sounds as well as words. This was first pointed out by the Australian scholars Robert Hodge and David Tripp in their book on a semiotic approach to children and television:

There are two implications for the study of children and television for us to address here. One is that there may be an additional kind of 'content' that children might be acquiring from television. In addition to the abstract deep content which Lévi-Strauss called 'understanding the myth', children may be acquiring the basic grammar of the medium: an abstract set of rules which enable complex meanings to be understood and possibly produced. Second, the linguistic methodologies suggest ways of discovering this content, a content which is so important both in itself and in its determining effects on how other content will be understood. (Hodge and Tripp 1986:45)

Our ambition is, on the one hand, to look into how texts create a potential for meaning through their structure, which may vary from time to time and from one medium to another. On the other hand, we wish to describe how the recipient builds a readiness for making meaning from this great variety of texts in various media. This meaning-making process is furthermore situated in and influenced by a historical and cultural context. In the last instance, the process of making meaning from texts also involves knowing a culture, as the British-Australian linguist M.A.K. Halliday underlined in his book *Learning how to mean* (1975):

[...] every actual instance of linguistic interaction has meaning not only in particular but also in general, as an expression of the social system and of the child's place in it – in other words, it is related to the context of culture as well as to the context of the situation. This explains how in the course of learning language a child is also all the time learning *through* language; how the microsemiotic exchanges of family and peer group life contain within themselves indices of the most pervasive semiotic patterns of the culture. (Halliday 1975:80-81)

Reception Theory

Starting from different theoretical viewpoints, media research throughout the past decades has focused on the part the audience plays in mass communication. From a text theoretical standpoint, it has been pointed out that modern texts are open (Eco 1979), they contain "gaps" or "indeterminancies" (Iser

1978) that the reader must fill in order to make meaning from the text. Other theorists have been more concerned with the cultural and social context of reception. Stanley Fish explained the construction of meaning by defining “interpretative communities”, which determine how the “interpreters act as extensions of an institutional community” (Fish 1980).

Hermeneutics as an approach to the nature of human understanding was developed in German philosophy during the 19th century. Hans Georg Gadamer, in particular, contributed to our understanding of the relationship between text and interpreter, and in so doing helped to clarify some vital dimensions of modern reception theory. His basic concept is that of a “horizon of understanding”. This is the framework within which a text is shaped. The recipient, on the other hand, approaches the text within his or her own “horizon of expectations”. If meaning is to get across, an amalgamation of these horizons must take place. If the horizon of the text is exactly the same as that of the recipient (which is merely a theoretical possibility), the act of reading will be trivial. In all other cases, the receiving act has the potential of altering the conditions for further encounters with texts. The process continues *ad infinitum*.

By this way of thinking, *meaning* becomes a dynamic concept. According to Wolfgang Iser’s theory of aesthetic response, any text contains empty spaces, gaps and indeterminacies that require active participation on the part of the recipient. This way of constructing a text forms a textual strategy that is basic to communication as such: “...indeterminacy is a prerequisite for dyadic interaction, and hence a basic constituent of communication” (Iser 1978:59). The recipient must engage in interpretation by applying his or her life experience and understanding of texts.

According to Iser, the empty spaces of a text can be found along two dimensions. On the one hand, there are gaps along the syntagmatic axis of a text, simply because no text can tell the whole story. There will always be breaks in the flow of events, cuts in a film, where the recipient is supposed to fill in the gaps and supply what is not explicitly stated. On the other hand, there are empty spaces and indeterminacies along the paradigmatic axis of the text, connected to the semantic systems of the surrounding culture. This is where the recipient must apply his/her knowledge of the world, and of texts, in short the whole system of meaning implied by the text. Using an example given by Iser himself, we could say that for a Greek scholar there are not very many gaps in Homer (Maagerø and Tønnessen 2001:79). But for the rest of us, considerable background information is required to make full meaning of a text read at such a distance in time and space. If the recipient lacks this cultural competence (textual or encyclopaedic), more of the text will stay undetermined, or it will be determined by mere guessing, often on a very subjective basis.

Iser’s theory of indeterminacies was developed for the reading of literature, and is well suited to modernist literature in particular. Robert C. Allen (1992) reflected on how this textual theory can be applied to modern televi-

sion serials. Along the syntagmatic axis he emphasizes, in particular, the break between weekly or daily episodes. Every episode ends with questions unanswered and plot lines in development, which the viewers will reflect on while waiting for the continuation. During the break, the 'interpretative community' can play an active part, as viewers negotiate the understanding of characters and events with one another.

On the paradigmatic axis, Allen emphasizes the repetitions and parallel plot lines of modern television serials. These repeated patterns of events invite the viewer to interpret the relations between events and characters, creating new layers of meaning from these relationships.

Readers in the Real World

Wolfgang Iser's contribution is primarily a theory of how a text is constructed as a response-inviting device. His assertions about real readers, and what they actually do with texts, are mostly indirect indications. To understand the strategies applied by readers and recipients in the real world, we need an understanding of how these strategies are developed in the individual and in relation to the surrounding culture.

Within the Anglo-American tradition called reader-response theory, Stanley Fish (1980) has strongly advocated the role of the interpretative community in the meaning-making process. Like Iser, he denied the concept of meaning as a fixed entity. To him, meaning is rooted in the inter-subjectivity of the receiving community: "The observer is never individual in the sense of unique and private, but is always the product of the categories of understanding that are his by virtue of his membership in a community of interpretation" (Fish 1981:11). In other words, the recipient will construe meaning based on an institutionalized pre-understanding.

One problem with Fish's unilateral focus on the receiving side of communication is that he leaves no possibility for influence on the text itself. To take this to its extreme, one could raise questions such as: How can an interpretative community derive different meanings from different texts? And how are changes in the meaning-making process of the community to be explained? Are historical changes due to changes in texts, culture or society?

"Interpretation is the only game in town" is one of Fish' favourite statements (1980:355). For Fish, then, there is no principal difference between interpreting our perception of the real world, and the interpretation of texts. Iser, on the other hand, developed his theory in relation to texts that refer to a fictional world. Since this alternative world of reference only exists through the construction of the text, he can safely state that the reader must be an active participant in constructing this world. But notions like 'gaps' and 'indeterminancies' are relevant to all kinds of texts: The mediation of meaning through signs will always depend on a recipient determining the

indeterminancies, since no sign can be totally coincidental with its reference, as we shall see below.

In spite of the sharp polemic tone in some of the academic discussions between Fish and Iser, it is possible to see their work as complementary rather than conflicting. Both of them have initiated the discussion on the interaction between the interpreting subject and the textual object, but they viewed this interaction from opposite standpoints. While Iser focused on the textual structures, he admitted that his theory lacks a full account of how the actual interpreter learns to fill in the gaps, and of what the frameworks of this interpretive activity are (Maagerø & Tønnessen 2001:89). Fish, on the other hand, placed all his emphasis on the interpretive community, thereby risking missing how the response-inviting structures of the text vary with time and culture. In the following, we shall take both perspectives into account, with support from the cultural rooting of signs and meanings that we find in social semiotics.

Semiosis

Semiotics, as the science of signs, provides a systematic way of describing how signs convey meaning. It is historically interesting that the same kinds of questions seem to have been asked by two parallel movements: European semiology, inspired by Ferdinand de Saussure, and American semiotics, in the tradition from Charles S. Peirce. Saussure's main contribution is tied to the systematic description of language, aiming at giving linguistics a scientific base. Recent post-structuralist thinking has questioned the stability of the sign, and as a consequence the system as such, arguing that it is too closed and rigid to account for the flexibility of semiotic systems and for how changes in the system are related to the surrounding culture.

A broader understanding of the process of signification in society is linked to an understanding of the sign as a social and cultural entity (Eco 1976:66). To clarify the relationships involved in semiosis, we need to think within a model of the sign that includes its links to this changing world, as well as to the interpreter's understanding of and experience with this world. This is where the semiotic tradition from Charles S. Peirce offers more explanatory power for the process of signification than does the more static model of the sign system in the Saussurian tradition.

C.S. Peirce's triadic sign model focuses on the *relationships* among the sign, the real world and the interpreter. The *sign* or *representamen* is found in the "text" (be it oral, written or audio-visual). The *object* connects to the real world (be it concrete or abstract). And the *interpretant* (which is not identical with the interpreting agent) connects to the never-ending process of meaning making. Differing from Saussure, Peirce included in his definition of the sign that it is meaningful "to somebody": "It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign." (CP 2.228¹, quoted from Jensen 1995:21).

Now let us have a closer look at the interpretant, which would seem to be the part of the Peircian sign model that allows us – theoretically – to investigate the sociocognitive, emotional and cultural processes of interpretation. “Being a sign, the interpretant itself calls up another interpretant, and so on *ad infinitum*” (Jensen 1995:22). The Italian semiotician Umberto Eco (1976 and 1979) also stressed this understanding of semiosis as an infinite process. Jensen concentrated on three aspects of meaning particularly relevant for the process of communication: potential meaning, situated meaning and performative meaning. *The potential meaning* of the sign corresponds to the range of potential meanings in the text. J. Dines Johansen described it as “the interpretability of the sign as a function of its internal structure, and of the constraints placed upon its interpretation by its grammar” (Johansen 1985:251). This means that the text itself is seen as an abstract potential for meaning that can be actualized in different ways by the interpreter. It cannot be described directly, since the analyst herself is a reader, and every reading must be seen as a limited realization of a much broader potential.

This view of the text is in line with Wolfgang Iser’s description of how a text invites active participation:

As meaning arises out of the process of actualization, the interpreter should perhaps pay more attention to the process than to the product. His object should therefore be, not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects. If he clarifies the *potential* of a text, he will no longer fall into the fatal trap of trying to impose one meaning on his reader, as if that were the right, or at least the best, interpretation. (Iser 1978:18)

The audience’s actual decoding of media discourse will always be part of a concrete situation. The *situated meaning* must be understood in relation to the context (historical and socio-cultural), including the previous experience of the actual interpreter. The sign may be interpreted differently by another recipient, or by the same recipient in a different context. According to J. Dines Johansen, this dynamic interpretant is stored in our memory and will act as a disposition for interpretation of similar signs in the future.²

Peirce presupposed that the semiotic process, unfolding over time and in varying contexts, will produce “a more developed sign”, or what we might call an interpretative habit. Klaus Bruhn Jensen saw the final interpretant as a possibility for media discourse to be “reactivated outside the immediate context of reception as *performative* meaning that reorients the cognition and action of audience-publics in everyday contexts.” (Jensen 1995:24). This means that the process of semiosis may have a more generalized effect, seen as a “modification of a person’s tendencies toward action” (Peirce in Jensen 1995:24). This is what Peirce called *habitchange*, a change in the pre-understanding upon which all thought is based, including interpretation. Through the act of interpretation, the potential meaning of a text is actualized as a

dynamic interpretant in a certain situation and on a long-term basis may affect the conditions for future acts of interpretation, shaped by the performative meaning.

The Recipient in a Cultural Context

Seeing the recipient as an active participant in the process of meaning-making raises certain questions about the interpreting subject. Interpretation implies that an individual derives meaning from language and signs that are developed collectively. With respect to mass communication, it is even more obvious that the production as well as the reception of texts is situated in a social context. Differing from books with a single author, most media texts are produced by a team working within an institutional setting. And much of the concern about the audience is tied to the 'mass' concept: a great number of people receiving the same text simultaneously.³

Based on our previous reasoning about interpretation and meaning making, these processes involve individual- as well as collective-based aspects. Every single recipient has his/her personal background: cognitive skills, interests, temper and self-conception. At the same time, communication is always social, and this is a basic incentive for developing language (Vygotsky 1978) and interpretative strategies. An area of special relevance to this development is the individual's previous experiences with texts. What we might call the textual competence of the individual is based on these experiences, which themselves are situated within a certain culture – or, to use Stanley Fish's concept: an interpretative community. Umberto Eco summarized how this competence is rooted in textual as well as extra-textual experiences:

Thus it seems that a well-organised text on the one hand presupposes a model of competence coming, so to speak, from the outside of the text, but on the other hand works to build up, by merely textual means, such a competence. (Eco 1979:8)

Open and Closed Texts

The notion of 'open' textual structures that is underlined by Iser and Eco is mainly concerned with what we might call the *aesthetic* openness in texts. Their main point is to account for the ambiguity that we find in modernist texts in particular. These texts are open in the sense that various interpretations may interact: "each interpretation is re-echoed by the others, and vice versa" (Eco 1979:8-9). Open texts put great demands on their readers; they require readers to see the relationship between different, even ambivalent readings. Typical of closed texts, on the other hand, is that they firmly guide their readers to one way of reading: "They apparently aim at pulling the reader along a predetermined path" (ibid.).

A more ideological stand is taken by British Cultural Studies, focusing on the power relations behind dominant ways of reading and understanding texts. Stuart Hall's seminal article on encoding and decoding focuses on three possible decoding positions. In the *dominant* position, the viewer is operating inside the dominant code; the *negotiated* position contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements; and finally, in the *oppositional* position, the message is decoded in a contrary way (Hall 1973). Elaborating this view, John Fiske argued that modern television texts are necessarily polysemic, so that they might meet the interests of a broad and varied public:

It is more productive to think not so much of a singular preferred meaning, but of structures of preference in the text that seek to prefer some meanings and close others off. This is an elaboration of Hall's model, not a rejection of it, for it still sees the text as a structured polysemy, as a potential of unequal meanings, some of which are preferred over, or proffered more strongly than, others, and which can only be activated by socially situated viewers in a process of negotiation between the text and their social situation. (Fiske 1987:65)

While Fiske's interest is in the polysemy of *texts* opening up to various readings that fit the viewers' social situation, the notion of openness in Iser's and Eco's sense leads to open, ambiguous *readings*. In our view, these two perspectives are complementary rather than opposing. Taken together they give a fuller understanding of how the complicated process of making meaning from the media involves aesthetic dimensions such as pleasure and fascination as well as ideological dimensions concerned with defining our place in society and culture.

Sesame Street Crossing Cultures

In the following, we shall examine how the theoretical perspectives presented above can be applied to an empirical material. Following the introduction of *Sesame Street* in Norway in 1991, parents and pre-school teachers raised the question: How can small children follow this kind of television text with its fragmented structure and speed? Answering this question within the theoretical framework outlined above requires an analysis of the text with its gaps and indeterminacies, of the viewers' response, and of the interaction between the two.

As we shall see in the analysis of the Norwegian co-production, it represents a very special mixture of the traditional Norwegian children's television, and the more fragmented structure of modern commercial television. On the one hand, narrative cohesion is ensured by a plot line, on the other, this line of events is interrupted by inserts produced by Children's Television Workshop (CTW), loosely connected to the main plot (illustrated in Fig.

1 and 2 below). This textual structure may be seen as typical of the cultural transition going on in Norwegian television in the early 1990s, moving from a situation of a broadcasting monopoly to a multi-channel system of competition. The analysis focuses on the two dimensions of gaps and indeterminacies outlined by Wolfgang Iser: The syntagmatic cohesion along the temporal succession of scenes and sequences, and the paradigmatic axis conveying the patterns of meaning in the text.⁴

The viewers' responses to two separate episodes of the programme were recorded in a qualitative study including two waves of data collection (1993 and 1995) with 30 children aged four and six. A core group of ten children were included in both sets of data, allowing for a study of their development from four to six years. In order to study the recipients' responses, a broad range of data was compiled for each child: They were observed while watching, then interviewed in pairs, and finally they were asked to make a video-taped Sesame story of their own. The data also included drawings and background information on the children's use of the media and their 'cultural profile' in terms of interests in reading, viewing and other leisure-time activities. The parents provided the background information.

Coherence: Plot and Order

Signs are interpreted in relation to the totality of which they are a part. This is why the interpretation of every single event, character or setting can only be understood in full if we take the whole text into account. How connections are made from one part of the text to another becomes of vital interest to understanding the interpretive process.

Structures of Cohesion

The most elaborated theoretical reflections on how texts are made into coherent entities have been carried out within narratology and text linguistics. In narrative theory, the minimum claim has been that a narrative must be ordered by temporal succession (Rimmon-Kennan 1983). From this perspective the basic structuring factor in a story is time: The fact that one event precedes or follows another event defines its position in a narrative structure.

Other theorists claim that, in addition to temporal succession, the events must be connected by some kind of logic. In what Jean M. Mandler (1984) called the "canonical story", this order is causal and consequential, linking a cause to its effect. The coherence of the whole story, then, is ensured by the causal connection from the beginning to the end – from stating a conflict or a problem through to its logical solution. Tzvetan Todorov (1971) added that this narrative logic has to be of a special transformational kind. The state of

being at the beginning is transformed through the course of events to its inverse at the end in a symmetrical pattern that takes the reader from unhappiness to happiness or vice versa, or perhaps from ignorance to insight.

In her investigation of "Narrative form in American network television" (1986), Jane Feuer claimed that the television medium represents a different form of story telling. Her assertion is that the insight derived from novels and movies is not relevant to the description of the narrative structures in television. Opposing Bordwell and Thompson's definition of narrative as "a chain of events in cause/effect relationship occurring in time", her point is that "the television apparatus works against logical notions of causality and closure" (Feuer 1986:102). Alternatively she referred to John Ellis' (1982) work describing the segment of the television narrative as "a relatively self-contained scene that is discontinuous with other segments".

Feuer's comments are worth keeping in mind as we proceed to describing the structure of the particular television texts to be analysed here. The Norwegian version of Sesame Street represents the first generation of children's television in a multi-channel setting in Norway, and is thus influenced by the technical and institutional apparatus of modern global television. Furthermore, when viewers have a choice between several television stations, one can question the validity of analysing a television programme as *one* text. The normal situation of television reception should perhaps instead be characterized as a *flow* of "relatively self-contained" segments, whether they appear within the same programme or in the course of surfing between several television channels.

The question still remains: How is each and every segment interpreted within its immediate context? How can the meaning of one segment create expectations that become the horizon within which the next segment is interpreted? And how is this interpretation related to the conventions of culture, on the one hand, and more individualized patterns of understanding, on the other? Even if we disregard the notion of a "cause/effect relationship occurring in time", the segments may still be connected, for instance in a thematic or associative manner. Robert C. Allen characterized the structure of the soap opera by claiming that it "trades narrative closure for paradigmatic complexity" (1992:111). Whether this makes the modern television serial more complex than the traditional story is a matter of debate (Gripsrud 1994:221), and there is probably no general answer to this question.

In this particular study, the focus is on how very young children come to develop knowledge of narrative structures or other connections through the course of an unfolding television text, and how they apply this competence in relation to a changing text universe.

Hatching the Plot

Working with children and narratives, Barbara Leondar became fascinated by the way children develop “a mature literary intelligence” (1977:172). Analysing more than 300 stories collected in kindergartens and schools, she found that the common form is a ‘primary narrative’ consisting of an introduction of the situation followed by a three-phased line of events moving through action, reaction and solution. What distinguishes this narrative form from Todorov’s description of five basic narrative elements in a symmetrical pattern is that the children rarely included the protagonist’s mental reaction to the problem presented. The primary narrative focused on action rather than thought and psychology, and appeared very early:

The evidence of the primary narratives urges the conclusion that literary competence is neither haphazard in its growth nor accidental in its form. That most children by the age of five or six, and some children much earlier, have attained a degree of skill represented by these stories, attests to the systematic character of growth. And that degree of skill is by no means negligible. Although the primary narrative is a skeletal form, it utilizes all the elements of mature literature and thus contains within itself the possibility of richer and subtler transformations. (Leondar 1977:189)

When cognitive psychology has described how children learn to understand narrative form and syntax, the process has been presented as acquisition of story schemata. A schema defines the elements that can be included in a story and the relationship between these elements. A narrative typically contains events as well as descriptions of characters and settings or scenes, and the schema also provides information on which elements can be combined, and how they can be connected to a sequence of events with a beginning, middle and end.

Jean M. Mandler pointed to the connection between experiences with stories and the establishment of a narrative schema:

The close connection between a story grammar and a story schema arises from the fact that the story schema is a mental reflection of the regularities that the processor has discovered (or constructed) through interacting with stories. (Mandler 1984:18)

This line of thought makes it reasonable to believe that previous experience with stories will shape the schemata applied in future interpretative processes. In other words, growing up with television serials may make a difference, compared to growing up in cultures dominated by oral or written stories. According to Mandler, story schemata are developed on an abstract level that can be applied to different kinds of story content. The generality of the

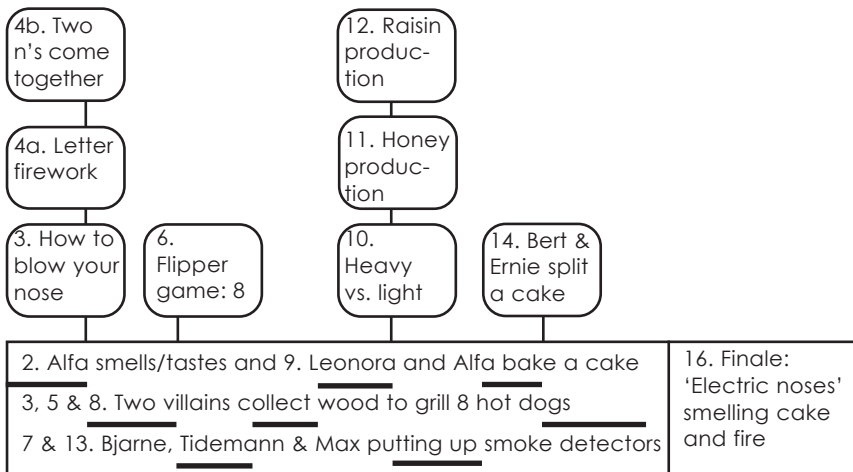
story schema makes it an interesting object of study when the aim is to investigate interpretative strategies applied in early childhood.

One point to underline is that the way story schemata work may not be exclusively tied to intellectual processing. Aesthetic and emotional responses seem to amalgamate with the cognitive in many ways, as noted by Fitch, Huston and Wright (1993:39): “television forms convey the meaning of television content by serving as markers of transitions in programmes and signals of attention-worthy content”. Recent studies on the relationship between children’s attention while watching television and the comprehension of the television story point to mental processes that integrate the emotional and the cognitive: “comprehension seems to guide attention as much as it is a function of it” (ibid:40).

Narrative Schemata as an Interpretative Framework

The two programmes applied in the Norwegian Sesame study illustrate different structuring principles, both relevant to the description of the Norwegian production as a series.

Figure 1. Sketch of the Structure in Programme A.



In programme A (Fig. 1), the typical structuring factor is the plot line(s) going through the 30-minute duration of the programme from beginning to end (illustrated by the bottom rectangular box). The Norwegian part of the production revolves around the five main characters on the station: The station master O Tidemann, the station singer (sic!) Leonora, and the three puppets Alfa, Bjarne and Max. In this particular programme, the lead story consists of a

crosscutting between three plot lines: One is about the two main female characters, Alfa and Leonora, baking a cake. Starting with Alfa experimenting with sugar, salt, flour and pepper (segment 2), the line of events proceeds by showing how they mix the ingredients for a cake (segment 9), bake it in the oven (segment 13b) and end up serving the freshly baked cake to the other characters at the station (segment 16). The second plot line introduces two visiting characters known from children's television in the 1980ies, Randi and Ronny. They are occupied with counting eight hotdogs (sequence 5), gathering eight pieces of wood (sequence 8) and building a bonfire to grill the hotdogs (sequence 15). Finally the three main male characters at the station, Max, Bjarne and O Tidemann, were co-operating in counting (segment 7) and installing eight smoke detectors in the station area (segment 13a). In the final segment, the three plot lines meet in a grand finale where the cake is served while the smoke detectors react to the bonfire on the platform.

While the main principle of cohesion in these three plot lines is based on temporality and causality, the inserted segments from the American production are connected to this main corpus of the programme in a very different way. These segments represent specific learning goals like the letter 'n' (sequence 4), the number 8 (sequence 6), concepts like heavy/light (sequence 10), sweet taste (sequences 11-12) or the idea of sharing (sequence 14). Contrary to the "chain of events in cause/effect relationship occurring in time" (Bordwell & Thompson 1979) that characterizes the Norwegian part of the production, the American inserts must be regarded as "a relatively self-contained scene that is discontinuous with other segments" (Ellis 1982), typical of modern television texts. The interesting question is whether the children's reception shows a preference for one principle of structuring or the other, or if we see a shift from the one to the other.

After the children in the present study had viewed this programme, my strategy was to interview them in pairs and to start with open-ended questions. Given a free choice, most of the children did not follow a strict chronological order in their retellings. The younger the children, the more they tended to start anywhere in the story line, concentrating on the plot point that made the strongest impression on them. The majority started the retellings at the dramatic peak, which appeared at the end of the programme where all the plot lines are connected. Other starting points were typically humorous situations, especially sequence 2 and sequence 5, both of which introduced one of the plot lines running through the programme. It is interesting to note that 25% of the children began by telling about Randi and Ronny, who do not ordinarily belong in the programme. This cannot be due to a tendency to stick to the most frequently repeated setting and characters, the 'meta-story' of the programme (Suoninen 1993), but rather to a fascination with the extraordinary characters and the central narrative placement of this plot line.

This tendency to retell the programme from the 'here-and-now' perspective of pre-school children does not lead to the conclusion that these children

had no sense of narrative coherence. Rather, it can be seen as another example of the mutual relations between emotional and cognitive responses to the programme. Answering follow-up questions, the children tended to move through causal links to connected plot points. Kaare and Ola, both four years old, emphasized the final sequences, but they also made the connection to the introduction of the smoke detectors as 'electric noses' in sequence 7:

E: I would like you to tell me about what you saw on television today. I didn't watch it with you, you know, I was just watching you. So you have to tell me what you have seen.

Kaare: There were smoke detectors, and then Max decorated one of the smoke detectors.

E: Really? How did he decorate it?

Kaare: He decorated it with a red button [the 'nose'], and then green hair.

E: Why did he do that?

Kaare: Well, because he wants to decorate everything.

E: Oh.

Kaare: He only decorated one of them.

E: But I think I heard them call those smoke detectors by another name. Did they?

Kaare: Nose.

E: Noses? Why would they call them that?

Ola: It was like this (points to his own nose) that they were supposed to smell fire or smoke and so on.

It is interesting to note that when the children did connect two or more sequences, they never mixed the events at the station, involving the regular characters of the series, with the inserted American films. This points to the emergence of a story schema based on some kind of logic that separates the events at the station from the inserts. For the six-year-olds, a pattern of chronology was added; they tended to retell one or more full sequences in temporal order, more often than did the younger children.

The fact that the children did not spontaneously include the American sequences in their retellings does not necessarily indicate that they were forgotten or not understood. The observation of the children while viewing revealed that the American segments captured a higher level of attention than did most of the long, slow-paced Norwegian segments. In the interviews, the six-year-olds mostly remembered them very well, when asked directly. Some of them could even explain the two textual levels distinguishing the Norwegian part of the production from the American, as Lisa and Mona do in this comment:

E: But what about the weighing [Sequence 10] and that film, the one about the girl with the cold

[Sequence 3]; were they at *Sesame Station*?

Lisa: (shakes her head)

Mona: No, they were not at *Sesame Station*. We were just seeing a film or something.

E: Oh, yes, they showed a film in-between?

Mona: Yes, but those thieves [Randi and Ronny], they were in the playground at Sesame Station, in a way.

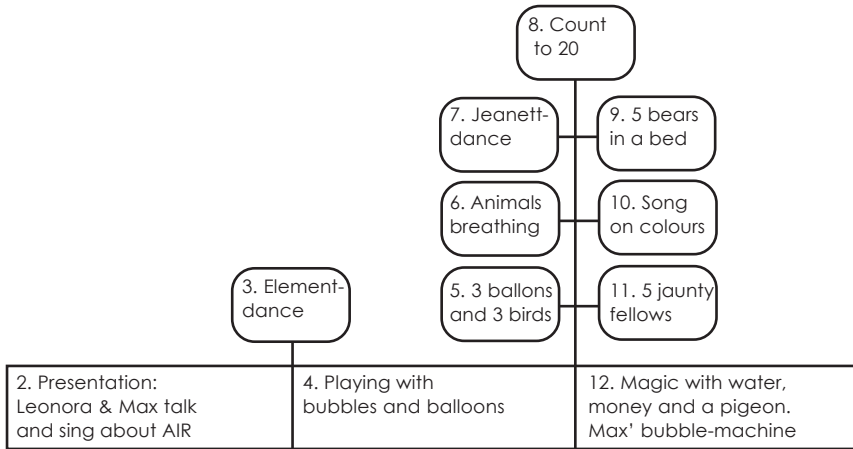
Two of the inserts were not retold by any of the children, not even when I tried to give them a hint. Sequences 11 and 12 are both characterized by being very loosely connected to the main story. Thematising the taste of sweetness, these sequences are separated from the relevant outset in the baking situation in the main story by the humorous little sequence on weighing. In the interviews, some of the youngest children said they were quite certain that they had never seen these films.

Taken as a whole, the sequences mentioned by a majority of the children are the beginning (sequence 2), the middle, with a fairly even distribution between sequences 7, 8 and 9, representing the three main plot lines of the programme, and the end (sequences 15 and 16). This pattern of recollection corresponds to Jean M. Mandler's overview of the parts of the narrative most frequently reproduced regardless of age or social and cultural background: The *setting and beginning*, the *outcome* and the *ending* (Mandler 1984:51). These elements can be regarded as the core of the narrative, suggesting that the children applied a story schema more or less directly in their recall of the programme.

Alternative Ordering

Turning to programme B, with a somewhat different textual structure, it will be interesting to see how this kind of schematic thinking is applied to another textual structure.

In Programme B, the temporal and causal connections are not as clear as in Programme A, even in the main events going on at the station (the Norwegian part of the production, represented in the bottom rectangle of Fig. 2). This may represent a tendency in the history of this production, which gradually became more like the magazine format of the original *Sesame Street* concept. The most important combining device in Programme B is a common theme running through the entire programme. 'Air' is a sub-theme under the overarching theme of the whole week, focusing on the four elements. This way of structuring a text in repeating examples of a common theme points to the thematic ordering of sequences, rather than the temporal and causal connections of the narrative. The programme is divided into three main sections: First an introduction (sequence 2) where Max and Leonora are discussing what air is in a very practical manner, playing around with buck-ets, balls and a flag waving in the wind. The next section (sequence 4) fo-

Figure 2. Sketch of the Structure in Programme B.

cuses on air in soap bubbles and balloons, showing the main characters blowing soap bubbles, playing with soapy water while doing the dishes, and experimenting with the sounds you can make with a balloon. The final section (sequence 12) introduces a visiting magician, making the water from the former section disappear and conjuring money and a pigeon out of thin air. Finally another link is made to the middle section when Max invents a machine that makes soap bubbles.

In this programme, the interruptions are limited to two. The first insert (sequence 3) is a Norwegian film produced in a different context, with children illustrating the four elements in song and ballet. The second insert contains as much as seven different elements (5-11), illustrating numbers and colours as well as the concept of air. This section lasts for nine full minutes, challenging the viewers' sense of coherence by linking sequence 12 to sequence 4 through the question of how to get rid of the soapy water.

The children's response to Programme B follows the same main pattern as we saw with Programme A: The main events from the setting at the station were most frequently retold even though the distribution is more even. A majority of the children mentioned the opening sequence (2). Concerning the middle sequence on bubbles and balloons (4), 16 out of 20 children mentioned the last part. This is a humorous scene showing the adults at the station in a playful situation with balloons. The other parts of sequence 4 were mentioned by almost half the children. In the final sequence (12), all the elements were mentioned by a majority of the children, focusing in particular on the classical magic trick where a white dove appears from thin air.

Compared to the retellings after Programme A, some of the inserts were given more attention in the children's recall of Programme B. In this case, two of the inserts are Norwegian productions, taken from a different con-

text, which means that they fill the same function in the programme as the elements from the American production. Both of these were mentioned by around half the children, but for very different reasons. Segment 3, where children illustrate the four elements through singing and dancing, runs through all the programmes of the week. An element of recognition as well as a fascination with the aesthetic qualities of the film may explain the popularity of this sequence. Kaare (6) mentioned this sequence in response to a question about what he particularly likes in the programme:

E: Was there anything of what you saw today that you found particularly nice?

Kaare: Yes, I think it was kind of nice in the beginning, those people, before that.

E: What people?

Kaare: Those people who were dressed like fire and ...

E: Those who were dancing, fire and air and water?

Kaare: Yes

E: Was that nice to look at?

Kaare: Yes.

The other insert produced by Norwegian television was mentioned by more than half of the children, but mostly connected to negative remarks. This film shows six little girls singing a song about colours well known to the children. The film is quite static, as there is hardly any movement in the image and only three cuts during a segment that lasts for two minutes. Both the groups observed while watching the programme showed a drop of attention when this sequence was on, and one of the boys remarked that it was "so boring!" But since most of the children knew this song, it was easy for them to repeat it in the interview.

The long series of inserts including sequences 5-9 in the second half of the programme was mentioned by only one to four of the children. These sequences repeat the thematic focus on air (segments 5-7) and illustrate the numbers 20 and 5. The most probable reason that they are not frequently retold is that they are very abstractly tied to the main events – or not at all. In addition, the number of unrelated segments in this part of the programme may have affected recollection.

Corresponding to the response after Programme A, we find that the children concentrated on certain points of departure for their retellings. Focus was on the three sections of the main events at the station. Sixty percent began with the final sequence, with an even spread between the four segments included in this sequence. The fascination seems to be tied to what the children perceived as the most unusual segment, represented by the magician. There was a slight tendency for the boys to be more engaged than the girls by the machine that Max makes for producing soap bubbles. One third of the children (30%) started their stories in sequence 4, mostly focusing on the popular scene where the adults play with the balloons. Only three

of the children began with the beginning. They seem to have been eager to establish the common theme of the programme, rather than focusing on the specific events in this sequence. For Solveig (6), this underlying theme connected this sequence to the next main sequence:

Solveig: Well, it was like this... Outside Sesame station, and then they talked about soap and things, and then Max found a kind of bathing ring, and a wheel and things, and then ...

E: Mhm. But what did that have to do with the soap?

Solveig: Well, I'm not really sure, they just talked about soap. And then, and ... soap to make bubbles and things.

E: Yes. Who was making the bubbles?

Solveig: I think it was O Tidemann.

The retellings of both programmes show how the children seem to have applied two different strategies. Most of the children began with the sequence that they enjoyed the most, revealing an intuitive understanding of how the dramatic peaks of the programme are shaped. The other strategy is less common, starting with the beginning or an introduction of the overarching theme of the programme. This strategy is more typical of the reception of Programme B, which is more clearly structured around thematic connections than is Programme A.

Explicitly Stated Connections

Most typically, the children in my material retold the programme as separate segments. If they connect two or more segments, they rarely express explicitly the connection between them. The children's concept of narrative structure and schemata is primarily represented indirectly through their choices of what to tell and of where to begin, as emphasized in the above analysis. But in some cases the children provided a clue as to the kind of logic they applied in their understanding of how the segments are connected.⁵

The most common signal showing that the children applied some kind of linear connections is when they retold two or more elements from the same plot line. This kind of logic is most easily identified in the responses to Programme A, where the plot lines represent a strong connecting factor. For instance, at the age of four Sverre connected the plot line involving Randi and Ronny (sequences 8 and 15) with the final sequence (16):

E: OK, tell me about what happened at Sesame Station this time.

Sverre: Well, there were some people who were going to ... A man took some logs and then he threw them down. "Ouch!" (he limps demonstratively)

E: Oh yes, was it ...

Sverre: He got them right on his t...

E: Did someone get them on the toe?

Per: Yes. A thief.

E: Was that a thief?

Per: Yes, you know. Those thieves.

Sverre: And then, and then they grilled on the bonfire, and then they put some grass on. And then they ran away. And then there was a fire, and then the (searching for the right word), the 'smector' [smoke detector] rang. And then: "Hurry up Tidemann," said Leonora. And then they came in. And he was in there. And then the thieves came, and they were all covered with ice.

In his verbal reconstruction, Sverre used the typical temporal "and then" construction. The fact that the children rarely used conjunctions expressing causality is probably mainly due to their verbal faculties. But underlying Sverre's story is a causal logic connecting the wood, the fire, the grass creating smoke and the main male character, O Tidemann, extinguishing the fire. The selection of events within 17 minutes of the programme indicates that such logic was at work.

This sense of causality was expressed more often by the six-year-olds than by the younger children. Even more common was the expression of causality within a segment, in the cases where these were structured as mini narratives.

The six-year-olds accounted for almost twice as many expressions of temporal and/or causal connections within the segments as did the four-year-olds. The proportion is even higher with regard to connections across segments. Thus we see a marked increase from the age of four to six as regards this way of constructing an understanding of the text as a whole.

When the cohesion of the text is not primarily based on the cause-and-effect chain of a story grammar, as we have seen in relation to Programme A, the children seemed to find other ways of defining connections. The most common was to tie together segments that are centred on a common theme or one particular character. In our interview after Programme B, Marit (6) concluded: "They talked a lot about air". This thematic reasoning is typical of the six-year-olds, but quite rare among the four-year-olds.

Formal features also support the children in their interpretation of connections and levels in the text. The youngest children seem to have separated the inserts from the main events based on the mode of production. Haakon (4) said about the insert with six girls singing (sequence 10 in programme B): "That was just a cartoon." The same kind of logic appears later in the interview when he characterized sequence 3 in the same way: "That was someone in another cartoon." In both cases, the sequences are technically photographic film showing children singing and dancing. When Haakon used the word 'cartoon' it is reasonable to interpret this as a structural term, rather than a technical one.

Kaare (4) also used the term 'cartoon', but in addition he observed a more explicit formal feature. Even though he did not have a word for a filmatic

'wipe', he noted this sign of a shift in the television text separating the main events from the inserts:

E: Do Bert and Ernie belong on Sesame Station?

Ola: Yes.

Kaare: Yes.

E: Are they usually there? Do they talk to Max and Alfa and the others?

Ola: Yes.

E: They do, do they. But is there any...

Kaare: Yes, but they are in a cartoon.

E: I see.

Kaare: Not on Sesame Station, they are not.

E: OK. So they are in the programme, but not on the station? Is that it?

Kaare: Right. You see the red going around (makes a circular movement with his finger). And then comes a cartoon.

We have seen that Programme A is largely structured by the temporal and causal connections of a story grammar, whereas Programme B is mostly thematically connected. Comparing the logic applied by the children in response to these two programmes, it appears that the textual structures make a difference. The response to Programme A shows that the great majority of reasoning was about causality. Conversely, the response to Programme B was dominated by reasoning about thematic connections and formal features separating the textual levels. On the other hand, logic connected to temporal succession and to causal connections within segments is evenly spread. The latter observation indicates that the children's competence as such was quite stable. But they seem to have adjusted to the specific structure of the programme in their remarks on this topic.

Summing up the children's responses to the narrative syntagma of *Sesame station*, the most obvious interpretative strategy is seen in the separation of two textual levels: One main line of events going on at the station, and another level of inserts that are unrelated to the main events at the station in terms of time as well as space. The children demonstrated an ability to separate these levels indirectly in their selection of segments retold, and more directly in comments on formal features. We find this way of distinguishing between two levels in the responses to both Programme A and B, in spite of the differences in overarching structure. The reason may be that the children have established this division on the basis of the series as a whole. The main events at the station are centred on certain characters and settings, and may be connected in a narrative structure or in a pattern of thematic repetitions.

The development from age four to six can be described as a shift towards applying more of the conventional interpretative strategies known in our culture. This results in an interpretation that may be characterized as richer in the sense that it recollects more of the content, fills in more gaps and determines a higher portion of the indeterminacies. The younger children

may have had very rich experiences of individual elements in the text. However, as regards their understanding of the text as a coherent whole, they seem to have applied basically the same schemata as the older children, but these schemata are not as dominant in the interpretative process. This may account for why we find more individualized interpretations among the four-year-olds than we do among the older children.

Transformations of Meaning

There are many ways in which a media text can convey meaning, and there may be many levels of meaning in a text. Not everything is stated explicitly; sometimes what is meant is something else or more than what is said or shown directly. Gardner et al. (1978) used the concept 'figurative meaning' to include phenomena such as metaphor, irony, jokes, riddles, proverbs and allegory. Such transformations of meaning are basically rooted in the act of representing through signs, since no sign can be the exact equivalent of what it represents. They range from simple comparisons to complex play with meaning through several steps of transformation.

Gardner et al. were mainly concerned with figurative meaning in verbal language. They found that pre-school children play with meanings in these ways far more often than do children who have entered school. These early years seem to represent a period of experimenting with language and the manifold ways that words can create meanings. Through the early years of schooling, children seem to be more occupied with consolidating the literal meaning of words. Then, in adolescence, the use of figurative meaning increases once again, and at this stage the rhetorical work (Larsen 1995:90) of transforming meaning is more adjusted to the culturally accepted codes.⁶

In the audio-visual media, meaning can be transformed within or between the semiotic resources available: images, sound, words and movement. In the episodes of *Sesame Station* used in my study, there are not many examples of full-grown metaphors. One typical example can be found in Programme A, where the smoke detectors are called "electric noses". In this case, the metaphor is expressed in verbal language, as well as shown visually. As mentioned earlier, Max shapes the smoke detector into a face, surrounding the red alarm lamp in the middle (the 'nose') with mouth, eyes and hair. When the smoke is detected at the end of the programme, the 'nose' starts blinking. In this way, the metaphor is also rooted in the narrative course of events. The children in the study had no problems relating to this transformation of meaning, though it was mainly the six-year-olds who explained the meaning verbally.

A more common way of transforming meaning is found in the symbolic use of colours. Similarly, body language, clothing and style of dialogue are interpreted as characterizations of persons. This can be seen when the children unanimously characterize the two visiting characters in Programme A,

Randi and Ronny, as “thieves” or “villains”. The children’s answers to the crucial question “How do you know that?” typically pointed to colours, appearances and acting style:

“Thieves are black” (Svein, 6)

“They were dressed up like thieves” [...] “They said ‘idiot’” (Kristin, 4)

“They were tiptoeing” (Wenche, 6)

Visual Superiority or Motivated Signs

It is interesting to note that all the children referred to visual or audible signs in their characterization of Randi and Ronny as villains. No one mentioned the verbal statement made by Ronny when he tells Randi that he learnt how to light a bonfire in the “school of villains”. Generally, the children in this material made far more references to visual than to verbal expressions of non-literal meaning. One possible explanation, discussed by Rolandelli (1989), has been labelled a “visual superiority effect”. But the notion that the visual overrules the audible when children watch television has been disputed by studies demonstrating how children combine visual and audible sensory data in their attention to and interpretation of television (Pezdek & Hartman 1983). Rolandelli concluded that those claiming the superiority of the visual may have confused the sensory modality with the form of representation, level of abstraction and complexity.

That references to visual sensory data so clearly dominated the children’s response in my material may be explained by the level of abstraction of the sign system. Visual signs are typically motivated signs, basing their sign function on similarity or on causal relations to what they represent. My findings indicate how concrete and motivated visual signs may make children aware of how signs can convey an additional conventional meaning more readily than can abstract verbal signs, where the sign function is typically based on an arbitrary relation between expression and content. It is important to note, however, that the continuum from concrete to abstract does not necessarily follow the line from visual to verbal. Rather, the visual, audible or verbal may be expressed in more or less concrete or motivated ways.

Recognizing and Interpreting Non-Literal Meaning

According to Ellen Winner (1988), interpretation of metaphors involves recognizing the discrepancy between what is said (or shown) and what is meant, as well as reasoning about the transformation of meaning between the two.⁷ Recognizing the difference between what is said and meant is more common among my young informants than is expressing a full interpretation, especially for the four-year-olds. Only in one case do I find an example of

a boy aged four giving such an interpretation. In response to an animation film portraying two letters ('n') meeting and falling in love, Kaare (4) gave this interpretation:

Kaare: And then there were kind of n's on top of a mountain, an then there came ... One of them was crying, an then there came, kind of, and aeroplane. And then it dived down to the mountain, and then another one came out, and that was an n too. And then they were sweethearts.

E: Were they? How could you see they were sweethearts?

Kaare: Well, because they were hugging, and then I saw hearts coming up.

The full interpretation of metaphors was more common among the six-year-olds, though only one out of five comments provided a full verbal explanation, even in this group.

Summing up, one could say that in many cases the characterizations and transformational meanings contributed to enriching the meaning potential of the television text. In the children's responses, we rarely find what might be labelled as 'misunderstandings' of this level of meaning. Rather, if the children did not find these response-inviting structures meaningful, they seem to have skipped them altogether. That is to say, the text may remain undetermined, rather than convey a totally different meaning than that which is culturally accepted.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter began by postulating that meaning is not a fixed entity. Meaning constantly emerges from the interaction between text and recipient. The aim of this study has been to give a systematic description of this process of meaning-making and some of the relations involved in the process. The empirical material has illustrated the role of the text, in as much as the two episodes of *Sesame Station* studied gave rise to different structures of response. Programme A is dominantly structured according to a narrative syntax, and correspondingly invites most comments on temporal and causal connections. Programme B, on the other hand, is mainly structured in terms of thematic repetitions, inviting more comments on thematic and formal connections. The role of the recipient has been illustrated through individual differences as well as systematic differences in child responses as a function of age and gender. On a cultural level, the institutional framework around television production changed notably at the time when *Sesame Station* was introduced in Norway, mainly connected to the transition from a broadcasting monopoly to a multi-channel system. But this is, at the same time, the cultural context in which these children developed their interpretative repertoires.

In Charles S. Peirce's triadic concept of the sign, the interpretant is connected through the sign (representamen) to the outer world that is represented. Thus, changes in the outer world may affect the process of making meaning through signs. But the opposite is equally true: Changes in the semiotic system may affect the way we view the world. In the empirical study presented here, we have seen how changes in the television institution have opened up for new textual structures in television, even for the smallest children. In the next instance, new kinds of response-inviting structures may have created new habits of interpretation in this generation of television viewers.

As we have seen in the theoretical introduction to this chapter (p. 6-7), Dines Johansen's and Jensen's use of Peircian semiotics incorporates the dynamics of the interpretant in an evolving process of semiosis. *The immediate interpretant* represents the potential meaning expressed by the textual structures. *The dynamic interpretant* arises from the meeting between text and interpreter in a specific situation of reception (situated meaning). Since the dynamic interpretant is always situated in a context, it carries elements of the historical situation surrounding the meaning-making process. *The final interpretant* can be seen as a theoretical expression of how texts create meaning in the long run. Textual structures received over time may result in habitual interpretations, whereas changes in textual structures may create what Peirce called a "habit-change" (Jensen 1995:24). In this way, we may theoretically connect the changes in the response-inviting structures of the text to the repertoires for interpretation that seem to expand as the children's textual experiences increase.

When changes can be detected over such a short span of time, it may indicate that the interpretative strategies of the children are in the process of finding their shape at this early age. Further research will be required to see to what extent these children will apply the *Sesame* strategies of interpretation to their further encounters with television texts. In Chapter 5, we will take a closer look at the long-term processes of interpretation and meaning making in a cultural context.

Notes

1. The reference is to Peirce's *Collected Papers* (1931-58). The numbers indicate the volume number before, and the paragraph number after the period.
2. Lecture at the University of Oslo, February 1996.
3. This is especially true about television, the medium that has so far been the object of most audience research. These views may change considerably in the age of network communication and digital texts.
4. In the original study, a third dimension was included, discussing the modality of the text and the children's understanding of the relationship between television text and real life. There is not room for a discussion of this dimension in this article.

5. It is important to note that the methods applied in this study can only reveal some of the children's competence, while it is impossible to state the contrary, that a *lack* of competence is revealed in cases where it does not appear in the children's answers.
6. Whether these shifts can be explained as a result of cultural context will be discussed in Chapter 5.
7. These different aspects of the rhetorical work involved in the interpretation of transformational meaning can only be distinguished in theory.

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Chapter 4

Children's Television Reception

Perspectives on Media Literacy, Identification and Gender

Ingegerd Rydin

Media and communication scholars' increased attention to studies of reception as a social and interactive meaning-making process has resulted in a massive body of studies and a new field of research (Jensen, 1991). However, reception studies to date have often dealt with adults or young adults, whereas children in the lower ages have rarely been of interest. For example, we can today count numerous studies devoted to the soap opera genre and its audience, focussing on subgroups such as high school students (e.g., Klitgaard Povlsen, 1996), ethnic groups (e.g., Liebes & Katz, 1990) or women (e.g., Ang, 1985). But younger children's fascinations with television – from children's programs to light entertainment such as soap operas and action adventure series – have not been of particular interest for media scholars. Perhaps the idealized picture of children as naive and innocent and in need of protection has concealed the fact that children use television in the same way as do most adults, or that children might be quite competent in presenting their views and thoughts about the media.

The Reception Process

– From Implied Reader to Media Ethnography

The concept of reception is not unproblematic and, referring to Alasuutari (1999), it has been redefined a number of times. It was originally coined by German literary theorists (Iser, 1974; Jauss, 1982). They did not study the actual "reader", but the implied reader. Through a hermeneutic process of reflection and introspection, they assumed that texts invited particular readings (see Chapter 3 for a more thorough presentation of reception theory). A similar way of looking upon the concept of reception was put forward by Stuart Hall (1980) in his model of encoding-decoding, where he suggested that texts are permeated with ideological values and invite various kinds of readings depending on the recipient's own ideological frame of reference.

In the next phase, the reception process was studied empirically by presenting texts to real audiences. Here, the approaches varied according to the researcher's purpose. One approach focused on the text-reception process *per se*, i.e. the meaning-making processes of the text (e.g., Höijer, 1998). Another approach focused on the social reception process, i.e. the social practice, wherein the text is subordinate. This approach has often taken an ethnographic perspective as well, studying the social practice under natural circumstances (e.g., Lindlof, 1987). Here, one is not primarily interested in how the text is "read", but rather how texts are negotiated in social settings. There are, finally, combinations, as when the text is included in the analysis of the social practice (e.g., Rasmussen, 1993). All approaches make sense, because our relationships with the media can vary. Sometimes we use the media as a purely private activity and enter into a dialogue with the text itself. But sometimes we deliberately arrange social settings, e.g., meet friends to watch a favourite series. Here the text is sometimes, but not always, of minor importance, whereas the social context is given primacy. Alasuutari (1999) suggested still another type of approach to reception studies, namely the constructivist view. This "third" generation approach focuses on how we understand our own relationships with the media. It is a kind of meta-approach.

The objective is to get a grasp of our contemporary 'media culture', particularly as it can be seen in the role of the media in everyday life, both as a topic and as an activity structured by and structuring the discourses within which it is discussed. (p. 6)

This approach has some similarity with the original uses-and-gratification approach, which focussed on people's perceptions and awareness of the functions of the media in their own lives. What is "new" about this generation is that one uses qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, through which people's arguments and conceptions as well as cultural representations are studied. Such a methodology may reveal the complexity and the ambiguity of people's attitudes towards the media, as compared to the traditional uses-and-gratification study.

The present investigation falls within the category of *text-reception* studies, i.e., the "first generation" of reception studies, and focuses on how young children make sense of one particular television narrative. It takes its departure from Roland Barthes' narrative theory in order to study children's acquaintance with the narrative codes of television. The focus is on the processual aspects of reception, and by means of in-depth interviews, the purpose is to uncover the complexity of the reception process.

Development as a Sociocultural Project

Crucial to this study is how it looks at ways of reading a program and relates these findings to age and cultural dispositions. The perspective taken here is not purely developmental, but rather it views development as a sociocultural project. Still, we must keep in mind that age-based developmental processes cannot be separated from sociocultural context. At least in most Western societies, children grow up in sociocultural settings that are structured according to norms and goals based on developmental theory. Therefore, if we study children at a certain age, we can assume that they are all exposed to settings that are adapted to suit a certain age level. In other words, children from preschool through secondary school are structured and expected to behave in a certain conformational, age-related manner when they encounter various social situations – whether these involve people, cultural artefacts or other things.

Thus, the developmental perspective is so deeply rooted in the Western culture that we cannot simply ignore it when studying how young children make sense of the media. For example, the Swedish public service radio and television have always been very proud of their age differentiated program repertoire, based on insights from developmental psychology. Age differentiation has been regarded as a sign of quality (Rydin, 2000). We can question why the developmental perspective has been so predominant in most educational settings (Walkerline, 1984; Burman, 1994; Buckingham, 2000; Olesen, 2000), but we must still face the fact that our culture structures educational arenas that promote certain ways of thinking, ways of acting, etc., for children.

One of the purposes of the present study is to elucidate variability in thinking within a particular age group. In other words, I will focus on individual children in order to discover unique interpretations. As two age groups have participated in the study, I will compare these two groups. This implies that the approach also has a developmental aspect. However, the primary purpose of studying two age groups – six-year-olds and eight-year-olds – is to elucidate how informal and formal schooling might affect children's knowledge of narrative media codes.

Questioning the Concept of Comprehension

Most mainstream research on children and media reception has focussed on the ability to comprehend media messages. This implies formative research as well as academic research (e.g., Bryant & Anderson, 1983). For example, although humour is a prominent feature in *Sesame Street*, the vast body of research on this successful series has been biased towards studying com-

prehension processes, rather than affective processes, such as laughter and smiling.

Only recently have we involved children in the more humanistic reader-oriented approaches. In doing so, I have chosen concepts such as “meaning making” and “reader positions” rather than “comprehension” when studying the reception process. First, we can never capture how people comprehend media messages, as we must use verbal reports as indicators of comprehension. And this becomes particularly hazardous when studying children, due to their restricted vocabulary, etc.

Second, comprehension is but one side of the television experience. Children often watch television just to amuse themselves, to feel excitement and fascination, which includes the process of identification. This calls for a more open attitude towards reception, which implies all kinds of reader orientations: positions that can include identification and identity formation, emotional experiences as well as comprehension of narrative structures, etc. These processes are interlaced and constitute an inseparable entity. Yet in some circumstances cognitive processes dominate, in others affective or emotional processes are in the foreground, and finally, identification processes may sometimes be in focus.

Third, meaning-making also implies a complex process, whereby layers of meanings are encapsulated in the text. Texts are always polysemic and signify various meanings. Yet how these will enter the foreground depends on the audience’s experiences, for instance, sociocultural background, gender, etc. As James Lull (1995) claimed, making sense is a full-time job:

It is difficult in the first place to imagine anything that is not open to varying interpretations and uses. Symbols can mean different things to different people, and different things to the same person as well. Different aspects of an image or text can likewise mean different things to the same person or to different people. A text can be variously interpreted by the same person at different times or under different circumstances (Lull, 1995, p. 144).

Reading Positions

The concept of reader position is used to capture how texts invite different readings and interpretations. Gender and sociocultural experiences influence our reader positions. Gender positions are established through biology as well as through culture, claimed Walkerdine (1990). A consequence of such a view is that cultural structures more or less determine how a text is received. The concept of positioning is sometimes used to describe how viewers oscillate between positions, for instance, from a more reflexive/critical position to a more involving/engaged position (Klitgaard Povlsen, 1996). Thus, there are stable positions related to gender and socioculture as well as oscil-

lating positions in line with the postmodernist notion of “nomadic positions” (Brown, 1996). These might seem to be incompatible processes, but this is not necessarily so. A text can be read on different levels, implying that one is both structurally positioned and occasionally positioned. However, the text itself also structures our readings by suggesting “ways of interpretation”, thereby proposing that reading positions also are conditional (e.g., Hall, 1980; Morley, 1992).

A TV-Narrative in Close-up: Textual Analysis¹

The narrative chosen in order to study children's meaning-making processes is a hybrid between fairy tale and real life drama. The title “The Tale of the Baby” (verbatim) was based on the old tale of Sleeping Beauty, but adapted to a modern suburban environment. It has a postmodern format in the sense that intertextual (Jefferson & Robey, 1982) references are frequent and used systematically. The style also plays with stereotypes such as animated cartoon portrayals, but in this case the format is filmed moving images. The story could be divided into five different episodes and follows a classical story format (Propp, 1968; Vandergrift, 1986):

Setting: A young couple is longing for a child. But the woman never gets pregnant. One scene indicates that the woman has been to the doctor. After that she is very sad. The husband must comfort his crying wife.

Initial action: By adoption the couple gets a child. Somewhere in Asia a nurse finds a baby girl in a basket outside an orphanage.

Complication/conflict: To celebrate the new baby they arrange a party. The woman's evil friend is there and has brought her cat. The baby turns out to be allergic to cats and has difficulty breathing. The evil lady smiles and expresses her prophesy (the curse): This little miserable baby will not live until her seventh birthday. The woman's brother gets angry and throws the evil lady out.

Climax: The girl recovers, grows up, and soon her seventh birthday approaches. Once again, a birthday party is arranged and the evil lady turns up. During the preparations, the girl gets impatient and walks out in the street. She finds a cat in the evil lady's car and brings it back to the house to show it to her mother, who gets very upset. The girl faints and falls on the floor. Once again, the girl's uncle throws the evil lady out. The preparations for the party cease. The parents are paralyzed by the shock and are seen sitting at their daughter's bed.

Resolution: After a few days a boy who has just moved into the neighbourhood hears about the girl and becomes curious. He bikes towards the empty house and tries to open the door, but it is locked. Suddenly, the wind blows open the door and the boy sneaks into the house. Inside the house it is dark, and the parents are sitting at their daughter's bed. The boy steps up to the girl and makes "funny faces" with his eyes. The girl wakes up and the boy asks her if she would like to play. She tells him that she is allergic to cats and he answers that he is too. They both start laughing and become friends. Finally they are seen biking away together.

Thus, this narrative could be seen as a postmodern or late-modern text. In its form it is a parody on the fairy tale genre, as actions (happenings) and portrayal of characters are heavily exaggerated. It has largely the same narrative style as the original story, but events take place in a modern suburban area rather than in a fairyland "a long time ago", and the "princess" is an ordinary little girl, adopted from a foreign country. One can also find similarities with fantasy stories in general. Cineographically it has borrowed features from avant-garde film and television, with extreme scenography, for example, stylized characters with clown-like heavy make-up situated in an almost surrealistic setting.

The adult reader who watches the program will immediately recognize the underlying fairy tale theme. The traditional pattern of roles, the exaggeration of emotions, mimes and gestures, give a comic impression. Also, the old-fashioned style and archaic expressions that take shape in the original versions of the tale produce a somewhat absurd impression when moved into a modern setting, creating a parodical effect.

Here I will present some reading positions this program encouraged in order to highlight variations and the span of audience interpretations. The study was based on in-depth interviews with 86 children in the age groups six and eight years. Interviews were informal, although following a guide containing certain themes. The aim was to design and maintain, to the extent possible, a conversation-like situation. When a child addressed a topic, we followed that topic as long as the child wanted, even if it was not included in the original interviewing guide. However, a limitation was that the interview was taking place in a school context, which implies a certain sociocultural frame and certain expectations on the part of the child. All interviews were taped and transcribed in their entirety.

The analyses presented in this chapter are selected to elucidate how emotional involvement and identification are related to interpretation of narrative codes and cultural schemas. Another objective is to show how girls and boys adopt certain reading positions, as well as how age affects how a story is read. I will also show examples of individual readings. Finally, child drawings will be analyzed, as they illustrate how culture and reader positions are related to each other and provide insight into the role of identification in the reception process.

Gendered Readings

The program was deliberately chosen to fit a female audience, in particular. The protagonist is the Sleeping Beauty girl, whereas a boy gets a major role in the final episode, the resolution. Moreover, the overall theme of the story is more suited to a female audience. The plot revolves around the theme "ethic of care", to use Carol Gilligan's (1982) words, and the idea behind this metaphor is that girls' thinking is more focussed on relations, whereas boys tend to adopt a more distanced position, maintaining a logical thinking position. When girls and boys discuss moral dilemmas they suggest different solutions:

He impersonally through systems of logic and law, she personally through communication and relationship. Just as he relies on the conventions of logic to deduce the solution to this dilemma, assuming these conventions to be shared, so she relies on a process of communication, assuming connection and believing that her voice will be heard (Gilligan, 1982, p. 29).

One example of the "ethic of care" is provided in an excerpt of a conversation with six-year-old Tora:

- I: If you were to tell me this story, what would you tell me? What happened in the story?
 T: *May I ask something first? (I: mm) How come that girl didn't have any parents?*
 I: Hm, that's a good question
 T: *It was a little strange*
 I: Yes
 T: *Maybe they didn't like her*
 I: Or maybe the parents had died when she was little, or they couldn't take care of her, maybe
 T: *Or?*
 I: But, we never really are told the reason
 T: *Maybe they thought it was too much trouble?*
 I: I see, you'd like to have an answer (T:Hm) the reason why she didn't have any parents
 T: *Mm. It's a little funny. People don't usually leave their kids like that.*
 I: No, they don't

Tora's first question concerns why the girl did not have any parents." Somewhat later she comments, "Maybe they didn't like her". Further she asks, "Maybe they thought it was too much trouble?" Tora is emotionally involved in the separation and is trying to understand the traumatic situation the baby might be in. The program presents no clue to these previous events in the baby's life, but for Tora they seem to be of importance. Her anxiety and fear,

that is her fear of being abandoned by her parents, is included in her interpretation of the story. Such gendered readings, where girls demonstrate an emphatic and emotional attitude, whereas boys more often demonstrate a more critical and distanced position, could be found throughout the study, as will also be shown in the sections that follow.

Media Literacy and Narrative Codes

Children's readings and reading positions reflect their knowledge of the television medium *per se*, its conventions and cultural codes. Roland Barthes distinguished between five narrative codes or voices. These codes are developed in the book *S/Z* where he presented a detailed analysis of Balzac's novel *Sarrasine* (Barthes, 1975). The structure of the text is an interweaving of voices or models of the already known, which are shared by reader and writer and which cross the boundaries of the text itself to link it to other texts and to culture in general. The five codes are: The hermeneutic, the symbolic, the semic, the referential and finally the code of action. Through these codes, the text is interwoven with the already known.

The "hermeneutic code" (Voice of Truth) concerns "what the story is about" and aspects such as the "enigma" of the story, that is, how dramaturgical devices are used to create curiosity, suspense or mystery in the program. The hermeneutic code describes the path from the formulation of a question to its ultimate solution (after various reformulations, obstacles).

The "symbolic code" (Voice of Symbol) organizes the fundamental antithetical terms that are important in a particular culture, for example, masculine-feminine, nature-nurture. In television and in fiction in general, the oppositions "good-evil" and "black-white" are central themes.

The "semic code" (Voice of Person) works on the level of semes (signifiers), that is on a less abstract level than the symbolic code, to give meaning to characters, objects and settings. Certain constellations of features create a "seme" or certain meanings attached to a character; for example, "the sad mother" or "the evil lady". By a combination of features, such as speech, clothes, behaviour and gestures, a character is created. In other words, characters constitute various kinds of archetypical personalities. Such personalities are shaped within a certain cultural context, by encounters with portrayals in media.

Culture also works through the "referential code" (Voice of Science), which refers to the world beyond the "text", "the real world" (a cultural product *per se*) and through other cultural knowledge such as media experiences, or other bodies of knowledge (psychological, critical, philosophic, historic), and thus constitutes an intertextual process. When working with children, the referential code is crucial, as it affects the question of a child's competence to make fantasy-reality distinctions: Is this story real or pretend? This issue

has been widely explored in media research on children, as it is crucial to the development of a more critical attitude towards the media.

Barthes's "code of action" (Voice of Empirics) is also intertextual. It is an empirical code referring to what is already known from or already read in other texts. It suggests that we understand any action in a narrative in its sequence of actions and by our experience of similar actions in other narratives, and that our narrative experience is an aggregation of details arranged in generic categories of actions – murder, rendezvous, theft, for example.

The Hermeneutic Code

The hermeneutic code, i.e. how children construct a story from the televised story, could be studied in a number of ways. As the program has layers of meanings, it could be read either as a fairy tale or as a story of everyday events, i.e. it invited more than one reading as well as different types of stylistic readings. At least three different reader positions could be distinguished: dramatic reading of an everyday story, fairy tale reading or parodic reading.

Everyday Story Reading

One type of position is exemplified when the children stress that the story is about an allergic girl in present time and that the events are authentic. Children disregard the magic elements, such as the curse, and construct a story based on everyday events. Mia's story may illustrate this type:

I: Mm....What was the programme about? Do you remember what it was about?

M: It was about a mother and a father and a little girl. They wanted to have a baby, but they didn't get one. Then they found one

I: Mm

M: They got one then <whispering>

I: Mm...and then?

M: And then she had a birthday and then, well...she had invited all the children in the neighbourhood and then, well...she couldn't have any party because she had gone out to the street, where she wasn't supposed to go, and had got into a car and taken a kitty-cat, and she couldn't stand [was allergic to] cats, so she died or she fai...fainted

I: Mm

M: And then he heard her heart beating so weak

I: Who heard it?

M: That awful lady's brother

I: Uhum...mm

M: Or the girl... and then... then they checked the little girl and a boy came into the house

I: Mm...mm

M: And mm...he came in <whispering>...and he rolled his eyes, and she laughed

I: Mm

M: And so they played together and had a lot of fun

Mia constructs a short story of events from real life. She does not include the magic elements at all. The story is focussed on concrete events, which occur in logical and chronological order; the girl becomes allergic, she faints and she wakes up. She ends her story with a coda: "they played together and had a lot of fun" rather than a conventional fairy tale ending.

Fairy Tale Reading

Another position involved presenting stories in which magic elements are included. In the televised version, the curse was expressed as "a pitiful little thing like that will hardly live past her seventh birthday". The curse is an essential point in the program because it complicates the plot and increases the suspense and expectation of the next episode, the climax. However, none of the younger children included the curse in their stories, whereas about half of the older children did. The older children oscillated between the two layers of meaning; dramatic story from real life and the fairy tale genre, as in Siv's story:

And then the friend said that the little baby wouldn't live past her seventh birthday. And the man and the woman were a little worried. And then the man's brother made the friend leave the house.

And the little girl grew up, and she could walk a tightrope and things like that, and then came her seventh birthday and the friend was there in the house with the man and wife and the little girl. And the little girl wasn't supposed to go out in the garden, but she sneaked out and that woman, I guess, knew that she would do that, so she had left the cat in her car. [...] And then that friend laughed and was smiling because she knew what was going to happen, and the man's brother was a doctor and he saw what the friend was doing, so he threw her out again. And the little girl had to lie on a bed and was very sick, that little girl.

Siv conceives the evil lady as the engine in the story and refers to what she is planning, feeling and thinking. Siv oscillates between the two levels of the story and maintains a distanced position.

Parodic Story Reading

A third position takes as its departure in the exaggerations, thereby viewing the story as a parody, as in this example, from the eight-year-old boy Mårten:

And so this mama, she had a friend, a nasty, mean-tempered, really awful friend who had a cat and wanted her way with everything.

By stressing the characteristics of the evil lady, Mårten shows his sensitivity to the parodical features of the story. This type of reader position is often demonstrated by adults, as was noticed during viewing sessions with colleagues and students. They usually laughed when verbal and visual exaggerations occur. Such a position resembles what Klitgaard Povlsen (1996 and in this book) calls an ironic reading position in her study of high school students watching *Beverly Hills*.

To summarize, the three outlined reader positions are related to age. The dramatic everyday reading position is most common among preschool children, whereas the awareness of the underlying fairy tale theme was most salient among primary school children. Adults and some of the older boys expressed a pronounced ironic position indicating a parodical conception of the story.

The Referential Code

In the discourse on fantasy-reality, we can see how girls and boys take different positions. Girls tend, even older ones, to perceive the events in the program as real. Girls also tend to keep an ambivalent position and seem to be aware of both the dimension of reality and the dimension of fiction. It appears that girls have a more nuanced conception and reflect on the double meanings of the story. Their answers do not always indicate either fantasy or reality, but are more complex, whereas the boys are very prompt in their reasoning and refer to how the program is technically constructed. One example of how technical devices were used is provided in the interview with Rune, six years old:

I: Do you think this story was make-believe or for real?

R: Oh, well I think all the people were real, they weren't dolls. And the house was real. It was real that everything was locked up and all

I: But were the things that happened for real?

R: That happened? <thoughtfully>

I: Or was it?

R: Well, I think that man, he didn't throw the woman very hard. He didn't really throw, her, I don't think Maybe he threw her, but not that far. Or else

she jumped. That was make-believe. I think she was play-acting when she cried, when she cried tears. That was make-believe

Rune has taken a distanced position, and a meta-perspective. He looks upon the story from outside and he is also somewhat ironical in his reading:

R: When she walked the tightrope, was that for real? <jokingly>

I: You didn't believe it? <chuckle>

R: No. I don't think so. I think it was trick filming

[...]

R: I never would have got into that car

I: No

R: No, I wouldn't. But I don't believe she died, I think she just fell asleep or something

The Semic Code

Also, as regards the semic code, viewer positions attributed to gender could be distinguished. A possible reason for the evilness of the mother's friend could be related to jealousy or at least envy. Such reasons are often put forward by girls, whereas boys more rarely search for a deeper reason. Once again, gender differences could be interpreted in terms of Gilligan's (1982) "ethic of care", i.e. that girls are keener to find explanations by referring to human relations and to psychological reasons for people's actions.

Perhaps the girls, particularly the older ones, have a more adult-oriented social competence, enabling them to reflect on personal characteristics. Also the younger girls show a similar kind of social competence, as can be seen from this conversation:

I: Why, do you think, she was so spiteful? [referring to the mother's friend]

E: *How should I know?*

I: Can you guess or do you have any idea?

E: *Because she got that baby*

I: Because the mother had the baby

E: *Yes, I think so*

I: And, so, was she? ... What did she think of?

E: *...Nasty to children, or*

I: You don't think she liked children?

E: *No. I think she didn't like the baby. Maybe she was envious, so she wanted one, too, a baby*

I: Mm

E: *Maybe that was it*

As can be seen here, Elsa, 6 years old, at first refuses to suggest a reason for the lady's spitefulness. But after some probing she suggests an explanation clearly indicating that envy or jealousy might be the reason.

Marc suggests another explanation. He says:

M: Maybe her mother was spiteful when she was born. Or she was just born and turned spiteful and then liked being that way.

Marc and many other children, particularly the younger ones, explained the evil lady's behaviour as a personality trait. They could not find a motive within the narrative, but looked beyond the story. She was evil because *she wanted to be in charge* or *she came from the bad guys' team* as Per, 6 years old, believed:

I: Why, do you think, she was so spiteful?

P: *Hm...that...well...I think...that...she...well, that she was... one of the bad guys. Or something like that*

I: Aha, the bad guys?

P: *Yes, so I think that she was...and so she'd...she didn't want to be bad any more. She knew all the bad-guy tricks, 'cause she used to do everything bad guys do, but she'd become really nasty*

The fact that some children, particularly six-year-olds, do not identify an underlying motive or reason for a certain behaviour is at first sight in line with Piagetian theory, which claims that younger children do not think in terms of causes and consequences. Figuring out "why" a person acts in a certain way is a difficult task at this age, according to Piaget (1965). But in this case, it appears as if social knowledge intervenes, since a majority of the older girls as well as a number of the younger girls used conventional social knowledge according to adult norms in their reasoning. In other words, sociocultural dispositions, such as gender socialization, may account for different ways of reasoning about the potential motives for characters' actions, rather than general cognitive skills.

The Symbolic Code

For the symbolic narrative code, it appeared that conceptions and types of reasoning had a strong relation to age of the child, rather than gender. A classical stereotype in television fiction is that good people have pleasant appearances and are more often white, and that they often are dressed in light colours. Evil people often have dark appearances. In fairy tales we find, perhaps, the most extreme examples of stereotypical portrayals of people, where, for example, a witch is often old, has a long nose and a black gown,

whereas the princess has a very sweet appearance. In this particular case, it appeared that a majority of the older children reasoned in terms of the classical stereotypes. Erika, 8 years old, reasoned along the conventional good-evil dimension: *She was more angry, and like that, and the other one was more loving, and like that.* Roger, 8 years old, said: *The mother had the colour of peace, and her friend had the colour of hate,* which indicates insights into the action-adventure film conventions from movies about wars and battles. Siv, 8 years old, clearly indicated that the evil lady was some kind of witch: *Well, she was some kind of witch, this friend who made trouble,* thus making an explicit parallel to the witch as a stereotype in the world of fiction.

Younger children rarely reasoned according to stereotypical patterns and suggested more unconventional connections between appearance and type of character. There were also less gender differences in this age group. One example: *Perhaps she was a priest,* referring to her gown. Rune, 6 years, had still another explanation: *'Cause they're usually like that when they want to have a baby, I think.*

The codes of stereotypical portrayals are socially constructed. Children have learnt to read these symbolic signs and attribute meaning to them according to conventional norms. This implies that sociocultural experiences in terms of age – older children have more experience than younger – as well as informal and formal schooling play a role.

The Code of Action

The code of action refers to the meaning of action in relation to what is already seen or read. Thus, it is intertextual. The theory of intertextuality proposes that any one text is necessarily read in relationships to others and that a range of textual knowledge is brought to bear upon it. These relationships do not take the form of specific allusions from one text to another. To read intertextually, there is no need for readers to be familiar with specific or the same texts. Intertextuality exists rather in the space between texts (Fiske, 1987). It appeared that particularly older boys could make intertextual references to the fairy tale of *Sleeping Beauty*. One explanation could be that boys are more familiar with the fiction genre as a whole, as boys also reasoned in a more advanced way when discussing the fantasy-reality issue (referential code). One of the older boys reasoned like this:

P: *It's a mixture, it's like this...They've taken a little bit from all of them, you might say*

I: From which ones?

P: *Oh, from The Neverending Story and what's it called...Sleeping Beauty.*

I: So, you noticed that it was a mixture of all kinds of things?

P: *Mm*

The older boys generally found it easier to discern the allusion and/or intertextual features, as for example, David, 8 years old, who spontaneously drew parallels during his retelling of the story: *And then that boy came like [in] Sleeping Beauty, like a prince came riding on a horse, but it was a bicycle instead.* Jörgen also made a similar parallel during the reconstruction phase: *It's about some... And then it was like in Cinderella, or that one.* (Changes to *Sleeping Beauty* later in the interview). *First, it was about how she was going to die on her fifteenth birthday, but that she [the girl in the present story] would die on her seventh birthday.*

The conclusion from these findings is that gender more than age explained differences in intertextual media literacy. One possible explanation is that boys generally are more familiar with genre codes than are girls. Another explanation could be that boys were less involved in the story and therefore held a more distanced and analytical reader position. Girls, on the other hand, maintained a more involved reader position, because they identified with the main protagonist, the girl, which perhaps made it more difficult to discuss the story in an analytical manner.

Identification and Reader Positions

The concept of identification is complex and can be defined in many different ways. However, we often speak of identification in terms of similarity or a wish to be like someone. In this case, identification was operationalized as a role-play. The audience was asked to reflect on what character he or she wanted to play. None of the girls wanted to be a male actor and just two of the boys preferred to be a female actor, i.e., the baby girl as well as the evil lady. The majority of the girls of both ages wanted to play the protagonist's role when she was at the age of seven. The second preference was the girl's mother and the third was the girl as a baby. Younger girls, in particular, preferred to act the role of the mother. The mother figure fits into the play frames at this age, namely mother-father-child play. The pattern of identification was not so discernable among the boys, because they generally expressed less interest and involvement in the story.

In addition to interviews, the children were asked to draw a picture in order to get a visual supplement of their reception of the program. It appeared that the drawings often focussed on the story's main characters and that they could be used to study hierarchies of importance and social identity. The drawings confirm and reinforce the gender differences exhibited during the interviews. The boys seemed to upgrade the subordinate gender in the program and they also underestimated, to some extent, the role of the dominant sex in their drawings. It is obvious that they imposed their own patterns of social identity on their drawings. The boys demonstrated an ironic reader position by, for example, playing with the text and placing funny

cartoon superheros in their pictures, such as transforming the evil lady into a Batman-like figure or a King Kong creature. One could say that the boys demonstrated an irreverent attitude towards the program as opposed to the girls, who took the task more seriously and often made careful and detailed portrayals of the main protagonist, the girl. Valerie Walkerdine (1990) took a poststructuralist perspective and claimed that we are positioned by class and gender to certain kinds of thinking. We maintain certain thinking patterns and frames of references due to attributed gender positions. The drawings reflect the subject positions of being a girl or a boy. Thus, a text such as this one confirms and preserves the dominant gender positions of the society.

The positions and relations created in the text relate to both a social and a psychic struggle, and they offer a tool for fantasy that directs the reader into the text. Walkerdine assumed that girls' fiction, for example romantic comic-strips, deal with the same dilemmas as in the fairy tales. The themes that are dealt with are the same as in classical family dramas, where young girls are victims of cruelty. This can explain why the girls showed such a strong identification with the main protagonist in the program in question.

Walkerdine suggested that the strength of these stories is their "unrealness". The fantastic program format allows the reader to process and maintain herself with traumatic experiences. Such a theory was also proposed by Bettelheim (1976) in his work on fairy tales. In the fairy tale, the identification process can proceed on the fantasy level through imaginary wish fulfilment. Such stories are based on wishes and dreams that already exist within the child.

The psychoanalytic frame of interpretation suggested by Walkerdine offers an explanation as to why girls were so fascinated by the program, whereas boys took a more distanced reader position. However, the "unrealness" must not be so distant from the child's own life that identification does not occur at all. What then happens is that the child adopts an ironic reader position, as was the case with some of the boys in the present study. A text can, in fact, be read in a number of different ways. It can be approached by structural positioning such as gender, but also on the basis of personal interest, the child's media competence or media literacy often in combination with age.

To specify a bit further, the findings of this study show that emotional and cognitive processes are intertwined in the reception process. Meaning making is influenced by the child's involvement and identification. Children who are not involved in the program seem to have a more distanced attitude, which implies a more analytical approach as well as a more ironic viewer position, whereas children who are deeply involved and touched by the program have a less distanced approach.

Note

1. The program is described in more detail in my thesis *Making Sense of TV-Narratives. Children's Readings of a Fairy Tale*. Linköping Studies in Arts and Sciences. Linköping, 1996.

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Entering an Interpretative Community

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Within the research tradition of Cultural Studies, much attention is given to the cultural context within which media content is experienced. The interpretative community provides a framework, a 'horizon of expectations', for the reception and interpretation of the media text (Hall 1980). In research in which adult viewers are studied, it seems to be taken for granted that the recipients are already deeply rooted in a cultural framework. But when children's media reception is the object of study, an opportunity opens up to also look at the development of such a cultural framework as part of the study itself.

This chapter will discuss how the sociocultural context influences the meaning-making process involved in children's reception of television. The discussion will take its outset in empirical material from a longitudinal study of media reception in a group of Norwegian children, covering the age range from four to twelve years. The data were gathered over a period of nine years, in 1993, 1995, 2000 and 2002 following a group of children from the age of four to twelve. The two first waves of data collection were part of a reception study of the Norwegian version of *Sesame Street* (presented in Chapter 3). A core group of informants from this study were included as part of a broader sample in the next two data collections. The data from 2000 consisted of media diaries where 114 children at the age of 10-11 made notes and comments on their media use in the course of one week.¹ Two years later essays were collected from the same sample, focusing on how the children aged 12-13 expected their use of the media to be in a near future. The topic given was: "Me and the media in the year 2004".²

The studies presented in the two previous chapters on how Norwegian and Swedish children construct meaning from television stories suggest that individual as well as cultural factors are involved in the meaning-making process. On the one hand we see how the viewers' cultural horizons and interpretive strategies have their origins in previous experiences with texts and media. In a rapidly changing media culture, these experiences are to an increasing extent shared with the peer group rather than with the parent

generation, whose experiences with the media are quite different. On the other hand, there are obvious differences within the peer group of children studied. These differences are seen in the children's retellings of television narratives, insofar as some children gave more coherent, logical and well-formed narratives in response to the television program than did others. In the Sesame study (chapter 3) the children were also asked to create their own Sesame stories which were recorded on video. These data gave a different perspective on individual differences in the competencies children develop in relation to television stories, since they included all the sign systems involved in the television medium (words, images, sound, movement) to a greater extent than the interviews.

Reception processes as well as creative production of television stories are always embedded in a sociocultural context from which they cannot be separated. In the lives of young children the most important factors forming this context are the home and the school environment, with a gradual shift from parental influence to the school institution and the peer group as the children grow older and become more independent. The cultural influence of home and school may be understood in light of the concepts of *cultural capital* and *habitus*, developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Within a social field, different forms of capital define relations of power and influence. The capital defining the value system within the social field may take economic as well as symbolic forms. A form of symbolic capital that is of specific relevance to our field of study is cultural capital, which includes a store of resources, dispositions and schemata of perception, activated in meaning-making processes. While the influence of this cultural capital is rooted in what is valued in society, or more precisely, within the particular social field, the concept of habitus bridges the gap to what the individual will make of his/her capital. Habitus is the term for a system of lasting, yet transposable dispositions, shaping the way a person reacts to texts, among other things (Bourdieu 1990:53). This is where the objective relations of power meet with the subjective experience of choosing one's own ways.

According to Bourdieu, habitus is established during the primary socialisation, giving a paramount position to the family as the primary group of the child. As we have stated above, the other social field of importance in childhood is the school, where the child meets the expectations of greater society as well as those from the peer group. It is a matter of debate whether this should be defined as one social field or two separate fields. As we shall see in the discussion, there may be good reasons to separate the two, as the children grow more independent in their leisure time.

Defining the family and the school as the crucial arenas for establishing a cultural framework around children's development of interpretative repertoires renders the study of media reception before and after entering school particularly interesting. In the following, I shall discuss the meaning-making processes exposed by the children in relation to the cultural capital at home and in school, and to their previous experiences with media texts.

Data and Method

In order to study the interplay between personal dispositions and socio-cultural influence, I will focus on qualitative studies of individual children and their uses and interpretation of the media over time. The core group consists of the ten informants who were included in both waves of data collection in the Sesame study (1993 and 1995). In the two following waves of data collection (2000 and 2002) this group was part of a bigger sample, which will serve as background information of a more quantitative kind, giving an overview of media uses and preferences in the peer group.

The methods of data collection and the content of data, differ in these four sets of data. The focus of study and the ways of communicating with the children differ, mainly in order to adjust to what seems relevant for the different age groups. The data from 1993 and 1995 concentrated on one particular television program (the Norwegian version of *Sesame Street*) and the children's responses to this television text. The reason for this focus was mainly that the object of study was the interaction between a particular (typical) text and the children's response to it. Another reason can be found in the viewing habits of pre-school children in Norway at this point in time: Practically all children in the target group would be regular viewers of the children's television program running every afternoon at 6 p.m. in the dominating public service channel (NRK). This gives the series studied, a privileged position as a trend-setter for the time and age group. In the course of the study, additional data were collected in interviews with the parents, establishing a broader insight as to viewing and reading habits for each child, summarised in a kind of 'cultural profile' of textual preferences and cultural practices.

At the age of ten, it was not possible, nor desirable, to focus on the children's response to one particular program. One reason was that at this age the interests and preferences of the viewers are more widespread, and it is not possible to find one program representing a common denominator for the whole group. Another reason was the wish to follow up on the focus on the cultural profile from the 1995 data collection, and to view this cultural profile of the individual child in relation to the whole range of media use, as well as to a broader group of peers. This focus on uses and preferences resulted in an overview of the media culture to which children around the age of ten related at this particular point in history.

In the last wave of data collection (so far) the perspective was directed towards the future, expecting the children to combine their present knowledge of new media with their visions of what part they may play in their future lives. Placing the visions within the private sphere of their bedrooms, the essay assignment was directed at finding out what is valued in the peer culture rather than in the children's relationship to adults in school or family.

Thus the differences in object of study and in method of data collection were motivated by adjustment to the children's cultural situation and their

actual use of the media at different points in their lives. The four sets of data cannot be compared directly. The red thread running through the whole longitudinal study is connected to the core group of children followed through most of their childhood. The four sets of data are all concerned with the individual's interpretive strategies, media fascinations and uses, seen in relation to the surrounding cultural situation. The research question follows up the conclusion of Chapter 3: How does the first generation growing up with a commercial multi-channel system relate to media texts as they grow older, and how can this be explained within a totality of cultural practices?

Case Studies

In the analysis of the two first waves of data collection, the core group of informants was grouped according to their preferred use of various media, as shown in Table 1. The case studies were picked to represent these four groups.

Table 1. Grouping of Core Informants According to their Media Uses and Preferences

	Time spent on TV (average pr. day)		Access to TV (at age 4 and 6)	Interest in reading (at age 6)
	Age 4	Age 6		
Average users				
Fredrik (4 – 6)	40 min	50 min	Multi-channel	Medium
Sverre (4 – 6)	42 min	30 min	Multi-channel/NRK+TV2	Medium
Kristin (6)	(79 min)	49 min	NRK and TV2	Medium
TV viewers				
Ola (4 – 6)	121 min	79 min	Multi-channel	Medium
Liv (4 – 6)	50 min	71 min	Multi-channel	Medium/low
Kristin (4)	79 min	(49 min)	NRK and TV2	Medium
Readers				
Kaare (4 – 6)	36 min	26 min	NRK+TV2/Multi-channel	High
Solveig (4 – 6)	34 min	39 min	NRK+TV2/Multi-channel	High
Eva (4)	39 min	(64 min)	Multi-channel	High
<i>TV+reading</i>				
Eva (6)	(39 min)	64 min	Multi-channel	High
Minimalists				
Per (4 – 6)	21 min	39 min	NRK+TV2/Multi-channel	Medium/low
Marit (4 – 6)	36 min	30 min	Multi-channel	Low/medium

At the age of six, some of the children could already be characterized as specialized media users in terms of their preferred use of various media. These preferences seemed, to a certain extent, to have shaped the text competence they developed between four and six years. Some of the children (the *average users*) spread their interest across various media. They enjoyed some

reading and some television, but no excessive amount of any medium, and their strategies for interpretation seemed to be influenced by their varied media experiences. Others carried more specialised interests in one medium, either television or books, even at this early age. The typical *television viewers* were drawn to popular culture, focusing on action, movement and salient formal features. The typical *readers* focused on reading (being read to) rather than television. They had developed linguistic skills well suited for reflecting on their experiences with texts and media, and a critical view of how television texts are constructed to make sense. There was also a group that was not very interested in symbolic representation in any medium (the *minimalists*), and that focussed on other kinds of activities.

Patterns of media use and interpretation at a very early age may be regarded as part of the child's developing *habitus*, mainly rooted in the cultural capital and practices of the family. When the child enters new social fields such as the school system and the leisure culture of the peer group, this early habitus may in theory develop along two lines. On the one hand, one might expect early specialization to continue, such that the 'readers' go on reading even more, and the 'viewers' become more deeply involved in the television culture. On the other hand the influences from school and peer group may move habitus towards a more general text competence, through a process of transferring experiences from one medium to a whole array of media as the child adds to its reservoir of media experiences. In the following, we shall present some typical case studies chosen from the groups defined above, to see how their interpretative strategies develop as they grow into the school and peer culture.

Sverre, the Average User

Sverre probably represents the most common group of media users with a balanced menu of different media, and a tendency to give priority to social life over media use. In his home we find two television sets, and the household is cabled.³ Sverre meets some restrictions at home concerning how much time he is allowed to spend in front of the screen. At the age of six, he is on the verge of getting bored with children's television, and is directing his television interests towards general entertainment. His mother tells us that he is particularly interested in cartoons. In order to limit his use of screen entertainment, she has chosen not to have a VCR in the household at this point.

At the age of six, nine months before starting school⁴, Sverre cannot yet read, but he enjoys his parents reading to him, and he shows a particular interest in his grandfather's oral storytelling. In his response to the television program, Sverre covers one third of the sequences in his retelling at the age of four, and some more than half of the sequences at the age of six. In this study this is barely over average for the boys his age. In both cases he fo-

cuses on the main story line, covering a basic narrative framework of beginning, middle and end.

Still it is when asked to produce a television story of his own that Sverre (6) shows some special interest in the semiotic resources of the television medium. Featuring two very small figures of the characters Bert and Ernie from *Sesame Street*, he becomes involved in a discussion of what proportion of the screen they will fill, and asks the camera person to zoom in. Together with his partner, he creates a narrative characterized by a loose episodic structure. It is not outstanding in terms of coherence and logic, but rather in its use of formal features such as music and movement. In particular, Sverre combines experiences from different parts of children's culture, among others a song from a popular children's program in radio ("*Barnetimen*") that has become part of the general child lore; and a line from the fairy tale about The three billy goats. This may be in line with his mother's assertion that he is a good storyteller, which gives his own experiences a flavour of fantasy.

At the age of ten, Sverre still distributes his attention quite evenly across the media. The only area where he differs from the average is in his interests in radio. In the 2000 material, Sverre is one of very few active radio listeners. This may connect to his favouring of oral storytelling at the age of six. At the age of ten, Sverre does not seem particularly patient with school assignments in writing, and he does not seem too eager to please the teacher who asks him to fill in his comments in the Media diary. His comments are scarce and sometimes absent, and he seems to get especially bored with repetitions. This pattern is quite typical among the boys this age. Their cultural capital seems to be directed more towards what is valued among their peers and popular culture, than towards what gives prestige in the eyes of the teacher. Sverre's orientation towards the peer group and social activities is underlined when he says that he spends time with friends every afternoon after school. His social orientation also comes through in one of his comments to a specific television soap, outstanding in its popularity among the 2000 sample. Sverre comments that he likes it "because everyone watches it".

Sverre's essay written at the age of twelve is first of all outstanding in its visual design. Telling his story about a future society totally overtaken by information technology, Sverre takes pride in combining images (typically clipart) with text. The result is a kind of comic strip on the first and third page, surrounding the actual written essay on page two. This may be seen as a continuation of the tendency we saw in Sverre's pre-school production, where formal features seemed to be as important as content. In his written essay, Sverre has mistaken the time frame and written about his life twenty years from now, in 2022. Though his essay does not include the topics assigned (media use in his room when he is in his teens), it contains interesting visions of how information technology may change society and social interaction in the future. He pictures a future society where there are no schools, since all the students are taught at home on computers, and digital communication has taken over for cars since no one has to go anywhere.

Summing up Sverre's life with the media through his childhood, we find a boy who seems to give priority to friends and social activities rather than media and texts. His use of the media is varied, with television playing the lead role and radio being his speciality. Entertainment and popular culture, far apart from the cultural capital valued in school, dominate the textual universe that Sverre experiences through the media.

Liv, the Heavy Viewer

Compared to an average viewing time of 48 minutes a day for pre-school children in Norway in the early 1990ies, Liv may be characterized as a heavy viewer. This is especially true at the age of six, when she is spending an average of 71 minutes a day in front of the television screen (20 minutes more than the average for girls her age in this study). She is growing up in a family with two television sets and a satellite dish, spending much of her time with her brother who is two years older than her. At six she cannot read for herself, and she is not too eager to have her parents read to her. The selection of children's books in the home seems limited. Her interests before starting school are typically directed towards international popular culture, with Barbie dolls and Disney books as typical cultural artefacts.

Liv's retelling of the television program at the age of four is scarce and fragmented, covering 30 per cent of the sequences in the program. At the age of six the portion of the program mentioned in her retelling has increased to 42 per cent, but it is still less than the average for girls her age. In her comments on the program, Liv mixes in stories from popular culture, especially stories she has seen dramatized in the local amusement park. The narrative structure in her own creation of a television story at the age of four is episodic and fragmented, which is typical for the four-year-olds in this study. At the age of six, she seems to have a practical grip of the textual structures in the *Sesame station* program, as she differentiates between two levels where a main story line is interrupted by inserts. This can be seen in her comments to the reception of the program, and it is even clearer in her own television story, where her directing remarks underline the shifts between main story line and inserts. Still the most remarkable part of Liv's story production is seen in her use of salient formal features such as little tunes introducing new story elements, and the active movements of the characters in the show. These are media-specific traits of the television medium that cannot be properly reflected in a verbal interview.

When asked about her media use at the age of ten, Liv tends to downsize her use of television and video, and perhaps to overemphasize the amount of time spent on reading. This can be seen by comparing the answers in the questionnaire where she notes that she usually reads books every day or every other day, to her daily account on media use, where no books are mentioned. Her use of most other media seems moderate at the age of ten,

she rarely watches video, goes to the movies or listens to the radio. She has watched television only four of the days covered by the Media diary, but some of the days for quite long stretches of time. Liv is among the very few girls who mentioned playing computer games and surfing on the Internet. Though 90 per cent of the informants have access to a computer at home in 2000, a majority of the ten year old girls rarely use it, while a majority of the boys do. The gender difference is more marked for computer games than for Internet use. The media content mentioned in Liv's diary is still concentrated on popular culture, mentioning *Titanic* as her favourite movie and magazines about pop music and celebrities as her favourite reading. But she seems to balance this interest with the expectations facing her from the school culture. This is even more obvious in her essay from 2002, which describes her future life with the media. In the excess of media equipment and content she imagines to be at her disposal when she is 15, she makes sure to include some informative material that helps her succeed in her school work. Her essay is well formulated, including personal style and dialogue as well as references to the news media. Her dispositions towards salient formal features are followed up both at the age of 10, with neat decorations of her Media diary, and at the age of 12, with the essay given careful computer layout and printed in colour.

For Liv we can see how her early habitus directed towards popular culture has been adjusted through her years in elementary school to accommodate her interests in popular culture as well as the requirements from the social field of the school system. Thus her meeting with school culture has moved her in the opposite direction of Sverre, taking a more positive stand to the cultural capital valued in school.

Per, the Minimalist

Among the pre-school children in this study, there were some who were not particularly interested in stories in any medium. They would rather spend their time playing with practical things than concentrating on symbolic representation. The most typical members of this group were four-year-old boys. At this age Per does not give priority to watching television every day. His mother says that sometimes he would rather play outside. The same holds for reading: even though his parents offer to read to him, he sometimes prefers doing something else. At the age of four Per is easily distracted during viewing, and he does not have much to say about the program afterwards. Mostly he responds to his partner with one-syllable answers. At the age of six, he sticks to one theme of discussion during the interview, concentrating on the technical sides of television production. He is testing out a hypothesis on how the set is built, and how they make the puppets and the train move, etc. When asked to produce his own television story at the age of four, his performance is mostly confined to greetings and introductory rituals. Two

years later, he also lets the partner lead the way, but now he is taking an active part in creating a story with a main story line and inserts.

At the age of ten, Per is still not particularly interested in symbolic representation. In the questionnaire he claims that he never reads newspapers or magazines, and rarely books. The same goes for watching videos, and his daily accounts reveal that he spends as little time watching television as he did in pre-school. The medium that occupies most of his time is computer games, mostly focusing on action and adventure games. This follows up an interest that had just started when he was six, and his older brother introduced him to computer games. At the age of ten, he has access to a computer and uses it more than average, and unlike most of his peers he owns his own mobile phone. In his Media diary his comments are short and he displays the same reluctance to give repeated comments on his media experiences as we saw with Sverre.

The essay that Per delivers at the age of twelve, excels in new technology: Per envisions a near future with television and computer playing the lead role in his room. The television screen measures 100 inches, and the satellite dish provides 150 channels, including interactive viewing of football games. The dominant role of computer games in his media use, and the impressive technology imagined in his future, can be seen as a further development of the habitus we saw at the age of six. Even at that point the technical sides of television production fascinated him, rather than the content and formal features of texts and stories.

Kaare, a Pen-and-Pencil Kid

From the very beginning, the material gathered from these children shows a greater spread in interests and competencies for the boys than in those for the girls. Per and Kaare may be examples of this. While Per is typical of the group of boys not particularly occupied with texts, Kaare is an outstanding example of a child deeply rooted in book culture, with a particular interest in interpreting and commenting on his television experience. At the age of four, he gives the name of the letters and numbers presented in the program. He is obviously used to discussing his experiences with adults, and being taken seriously. His home is dominated by books rather than by modern media. They have a television set, but no computer and no mobile phone, even when he is ten. Kaare's mother has been reading to him since he was very young, and is very engaged in his reading experiences. In the interview about Kaare's 'cultural profile' at six, she mentions books from the modern children's canon as well as classics, but not much from popular culture.

Kaare's analytic and verbal abilities were obvious in the interviews when he was four and six and his retellings covered more than 60 per cent of the sequences in the program on both occasions, well over average. This is in sharp contrast to the television story he produced at the age of four. Given

a set of the characters in the show, and some props (letters, numbers etc.), he sets out to sort them all out. After creating a perfectly systematic paradigm, he turns to the camera, ready to have a picture taken. This presentation shows his systematic form of intelligence, but also his lack of understanding of the specific semiotic resources of the television medium, such as movement, dialogue and narrative drive. At the age of six, Kaare is able to use his understanding of the textual structures in the television program in a more creative way, exposed especially in his directing comments to his partner, Per.

Still, the biggest shift is seen after Kaare starts school. In his Media diary, it is obvious that his verbal abilities are analytic and precise at an above average level. He is still a reader, and now a writer too. But at the same time, his ambitions seem to be directed towards a cultural capital more relevant to peer culture. His favourites on television are *James Bond* and *MacGyver*, figures quite far from those of the book culture he shared so eagerly with his mother in his younger years. His family is still not as well equipped in terms of modern technology as are his friends' families. But in his 2002 essay about his future life with the media, he knows what it takes: In his imagined room of 2004 he gives himself a choice between his own television set, video, play station and an XP computer box for games. The cultural capital that opened doors to adult contact in his early childhood is not as valid when it comes to gaining prestige among his peers. His habitus has been adjusted accordingly, giving the social field of (boys') peer culture a position competing in importance with the cultural capital valued in his home and in school.

Eva, a Modern Reader

Another one of the readers, Eva⁵, started out with much of the same cultural capital as Kaare. She reads at six, and starts school one year earlier than the rest of the sample. At the age of six, her cultural environment at home combines reading with active but restricted use of television, and with a very active life in other cultural arenas: She is reading, dancing, doing sports, going to the theatre, engaging in role play, etc. At the age of four, she seems quiet and modest, listening more than talking in the interview situation. Her re-telling covers 30 per cent of the sequences in the program, somewhat under average for four-year-old girls. But two years later, she seems much more confident, taking the lead in the interview as well as the story production. She uses her insight into the textual structures of the program actively in directing the story. This may reflect that she has already entered the social field of schooling, where her cultural capital in connection to texts has been valued and confirmed.

At the age of ten, she has a mobile phone at her disposal, and she is also an active computer user. Thus, the cultural profile in her home environment seems much more modern than Kaare's, even if they share the same interest

in reading. Eva reads newspapers as well as books, and in her Media diary she is among the few children who comment in an engaged manner on a current news story. Eva seems to confirm the notion that some children are able to combine a high level of activity within many areas, and she seems to have no problems balancing the kind of activities valued in school with an active use of modern media.

For both Kaare and Eva the early development of habitus was marked by a tight connection with adults engaging in the texts they encountered, especially before they could read on their own. After entering school culture, they both continue to display their strengths in verbal language. But when it comes to cultural orientation, it seems to be much easier to combine the cultural capital of school and peer culture for the girl than for the boy. For Kaare the peer culture appears as an alternative to school culture, whereas for Eva the two seem to complement each other.

Sources of Narrative Competence

The case studies discussed above suggest that over time there are movements of specialisation as well as generalisation in the development of children's meaning-making processes in relation to various media. At an early age, text competencies seem to be shaped in accordance with the dominating textual structures in the medium preferred by the children. But these competencies may be modified by strong cultural influences when the children enter new institutional settings, such as the school system. Our case studies seem to illustrate how the influence of school culture for girls points towards adapting to the cultural capital in the educational system, with its focus on books and writing. For the boys, however, there seems to be a potential conflict of interest between school culture and peer culture with its strong preferences for popular entertainment in the media.

Let us see if this tendency can be confirmed by other studies of the same age group. In her study of children *Making sense of TV-narratives* (1996, see also Chapter 4 in this book) Ingegerd Rydin devotes one chapter to focus on the sociocultural factors related to children's narrative competence and their mastery of cultural codes. The focus is on narrative competence, expressed in the children's retelling of a television story. This is discussed in relation to whether this competence has been stimulated by books or by television. The study covers the ages six and eight, but this part was limited to the eight-year-olds who were under the influence of school culture. In order to define the cultural capital of each child, they were presented to a number of titles from the legitimate canon of children's literature. The test recorded how many titles and/or characters the children recognised, and whether this knowledge was based on reading the book or watching a film/video/television adaptation based on the book. The informants were divided

into four groups according to their score on two dimensions: How many of the books they owned in their home, and how many of the books that were recognised from adaptations in moving images in television/video/cinema. According to their placement above or below the median on these two dimensions, the groups could be defined on the basis of a cultural capital rooted in book culture or moving images.

These groups could be compared to the groups in the longitudinal study discussed through the case studies presented in this chapter. The group that owned few books and recognised few stories based on adaptations in moving images could be compared to the *minimalists* in the Sesame-study. This is the group that differs mostly from the others in Rydin's study. Ratings based on the narrative coherence and richness of the children's retellings of a television story, gave these children an average score of 2.0 on a scale from 0 to 5. In contrast, the other groups were given an average score between 3.0 and 3.2. This result is in line with the finding in the Sesame study that the minimalists cover less of the television program in their retellings than the other children do.

At the other end of the scale, the children characterised as *readers* in the Sesame study could be compared to the group with high access to legitimate book culture and few stories recognised from audiovisual media in Rydin's study. This is the group giving the most coherent and well-formed retellings (score 3.2), corresponding to the richness of recall and interpretation within the group of *readers* in the Sesame study. The children characterised as *viewers* in the Sesame study could be compared to the group basing their narrative knowledge predominantly on TV/video/cinema in Rydin's material. The score of 3.0 indicates that these children display a narrative competence closer to the children with high access to books than to those below the median, both in respect to books and to moving images. This may be compared to the result in the Sesame study, showing a moderate narrative competence for the group of viewers when expressed verbally in the interviews. However, when given a chance to express their narrative competence in an audiovisual medium, this group displayed their strength in the use of the semiotic resources typical to the television medium, such as music, movement and focus on formal features.

Boys and Girls Go to School

In the longitudinal study an additional pattern emerges in the development of the children's relation to the media over time. In the movement from a cultural profile dominated by the values in the family setting, to a school culture where the expectations of educators and peers compete, it is striking that the influence of the school experience seems to work in different ways for boys and girls. The girls appear to adapt to the cultural expectations met in school. Whether they were considered *viewers* or *readers* be-

fore starting school, at ten the girls seem to have adapted to what is defined as prestigious within the school system. This can be seen in the questionnaires, where they tend to favour reading activities over viewing, even if this is only partly supported by the daily reports in their diaries. Thus, at the age of ten, Liv – a typical *viewer* girl – has approached Eva – a typical *reader* girl – in her patterns of media use. This does not mean that school culture has defeated popular media culture in the life of these girls, but their media use seems to search for a compromise between the cultural capital given prestige in school and that required to be considered ‘in’ among peers.

The boys, on the other hand, seem to move in the opposite direction. Whatever category they belonged to before starting school at six, they seem to give priority to finding their place in popular culture, disregarding the expectations from school culture to a much larger extent than do the girls. This is even seen in their lack of will to work their way conscientiously through all the questions in the Media diaries. At the age of six, the extreme case of a *reader* in my material was a boy. At the age of ten, his media preferences are much more like those of the *viewers* or *average users*, though he is still fond of reading, and a good writer.

This finding may be in line with the gender differences found in Rydin’s material, covering eight-year-olds that are already under the influence of school culture. When the groups described above are examined in relation to gender, boys (nine out of a total of eleven) dominate the group relying heavily on the visual media as their main source of narrative knowledge. Six of these boys demonstrate above average narrative coherence in their retellings. The pattern is different for the girls. They dominate the group with high access to legitimate book culture and low emphasis on moving images (eight out of a total of thirteen), and six of these girls demonstrated high narrative coherence.

These findings indicate that there may be different sources of narrative competence. Cultural capital tied to institutionalised book culture may be assumed to be close to the values favoured in the school system. But for children who don’t seem to value this kind of cultural capital, narrative competence may be developed in relation to other media more valued in the social field of peers and leisure culture. Taken together the two studies discussed here, both illustrate the complex interplay between individual preferences and sociocultural influences for boys and girls.

Peer Culture and School Culture

Zooming out to a more generalised picture of media use and preferences from the age of four to twelve, based on the total material behind the case studies, we find that the differences within the group are increasing with age. Entering the institutionalised school setting seems to run parallel with a shift in these children’s lives from plain educational children’s television,

viewed under parent control, to the ambiguities of global youth culture. Going to school involves a meeting with the expectations of greater society as well as an independent life in the leisure culture of the peer group. At the same time the children expand the range of media at their disposal, opening up to differentiated use. Both before and after starting school, television stands out as the mainstream medium, dominating the time spent as well as the attention and the fascination of the children. The other media seem to play a more supplementary role, accommodating special interests. In regard to the subject of this article, one could say that television carries much of the defining power in relation to cultural capital in the peer group, whereas the other media contribute to differentiating the cultural profiles of the media users. In the visions of future media use given at the age of twelve, computers seem to take over some of the defining power, in convergence with television.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital can be inherited or acquired through education. But when peer culture becomes a powerful factor in the social field, the cultural capital relevant must be of a different kind. It must necessarily be acquired, since the social field of the peer group is defined more or less in opposition to the establishment, and more so as the children grow older. The data presented above can be interpreted in light of the shift from *habitus* being developed predominantly within the family and home culture, to a situation where the children participate in several cultural fields, negotiating the cultural capital valued in home, school and peer group.

One of the most obvious changes following this movement is seen in the emphasis peer culture puts on the emotional fascinations of media content, involving very different forms of cultural capital than those valued in school. This is illustrated by the children's explanations as to why they like a specific form of media content, e.g. a television series. In the Media diaries the children describe their favourites using expressions such as "exciting", "sinister" and "fun", or they point to action and humour. These explanations have at least one thing in common: television gets its prestige from moving their emotions in a positive or negative direction, or both at once. The Danish scholar Bent Fausing (1977) has described fascination as "delightful panic". The Norwegian media researcher Karin Hake develops this line of thought in her chapter in this book. She describes media fascinations as at once appealing and repulsive, containing elements of excitement, delight and stimulation.

This shift towards valuing the strong emotional fascinations of melodrama, makes popular media culture and school culture two worlds apart, and the gap seems to be widening as the children grow older and more independent, especially for the boys. This may play an important part in contributing to the conflict of interest we have seen in the above case studies, a conflict between the cultural capital valued by school culture and that of peer culture.

Concluding Remarks

Following the children from the age of four to twelve, the case studies show how the development of media habits and preferences is influenced by several factors: Individual strengths and interests seem to play an important role in early years when the family is more influential than the peer group. As the child grows older, accumulated experiences with the media give a broader base for developing text preferences and interpretative strategies. The media experiences are situated in a historical and institutional setting that may change for every new generation of media users. And finally the peer group seems to play an increasingly important role in shaping preferences as the child approaches adolescence. This peer group influence is to some extent counterbalanced by the capital system of the school, especially for the girls.

The studies discussed here indicate that entering an interpretative community is not something that happens once and for all. The forms of cultural capital that are valued within a group change over time. In the life of young media users they may change because the children enter new social fields that define the values of cultural capital in new ways. At the same time the cultural and institutional contexts may change in a rapidly developing media culture. What may be seen as a kind of development through childhood, may equally well be explained in terms of the social construction of children's place in social fields and their share of cultural capital.

Notes

1. The media diaries were handed out in school, and completed through one week in February 2000 by 62 girls and 52 boys in five classes. The diaries contained a questionnaire providing an overview of the children's access to different media, and their own assessment of frequency and regularity of use. For every day of the week, the children made notes on what they had read, heard, seen, or used a computer for, through their after school hours. They also accounted for other leisure time activities: being with friends, doing homework, going to organised leisure time activities. In addition the children were asked to give two free comments every day, one commenting on a media experience of their own choice the previous day, the other asking for their media favourites in television, cinema, books, music, computer games and web sites. Finally the children were invited to comment on a news item from the week, regardless of the medium it was conveyed in.
2. The full data gathering in 2002 included written essays as well as focus group interviews and observation of activity on the Internet. In order to cover the core group from the Sesame study, a total of 148 students in six classes were included in the sample. In this article only the written essays are taken into account.
3. The information about the home culture was given in an interview with one of the parents when the informants were six years old.
4. Up till 1996 children in Norway started school at seven.
5. Since Eva has moved to another school, data from her are (so far) missing in the 2002 data collection.

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Chapter 6

From *Beverly Hills 90210* to *Ally McBeal*: Irony Everywhere

American Series and Their Audiences in Denmark in the 1990s – and after 2000

Karen Klitgaard Povlsen

Fame is Where You Find It:

On the screen we see Brandon roller-skating in the park, practising hockey. The camera follows his excellent and joyful skating until he stops, then the camera ‘becomes’ Brandon’s gaze and a second scene develops: Brandon (the camera and we) sees a family on a picnic in the park; they finish their coffee and leave the table. A young fellow steps out from behind a tree, looks around, and goes over to the table, grabs the purse lying there, and runs off. As he stops and takes the wallet out of the purse and begins to count the money in it, a pretty girl steps in front of him and reproaches him for his evil deed. The youth pulls a knife; she says this will harm him more than anyone else – he has so much to live for (she seems to know him well); she looks pleadingly into his eyes.

“Stop”, a voice shouts. And now we (and the camera) see another camera crew, with a male director and a female assistant. They are filming another television teen-soap. The crew is ready for the next scene, but one of the actors has not turned up. The director tells the assistant to find someone else – anybody (“this isn’t Shakespeare”) – and of course the gaze of the assistant catches Brandon roller-skating in the park, now seemingly innocently unaware of any camera, even though he is already the main character in a successful American teen-soap: *Beverly Hills 90210*. The story line is thus that a main character in a modern teen-soap plays a character in another, more old-fashioned teen-soap.

The fictive series in the series is a girls’ series; the female characters in *Beverly Hills 90210* adore the star of the soap, they have been watching it for years in the afternoons after school, and they have been reading everything about it in magazines and weeklies. They know the gossip and therefore they know more about life behind the screen than does the ‘innocent’ male character Brandon, who becomes a victim of an intrigue staged by the star of the soap, Lynda. However, this fiction in the fiction also places both fictions in a hierarchical relation: The ‘real’ fiction, *Beverly Hills 90210*, is

more modern, more realistic and less infected by traditional intrigues. It is a prime-time soap (as opposed to the five-times-a-week soap) and it is a soap in which the boys are even more important characters than the girls. The fiction in the fiction thus inscribes the teen-soap in a tradition of serialized fictions such that the modernity of the teen-soap of a new generation is stressed: The teen-soap of the 1990s is self-reflective, it is quality, prime-time television and involves more than one sex, more than one generation, more than one ethnic group, and so forth.

The scene clearly contains the self-reflective theme of how to make a teenage-soap, as well as that of what it is like to be an actor in this type of series. At the same time, the overture is so naively narrated (we are forced to smile when the girl tells the thief he has so much to live for) that the self-reflectiveness also allows us to view the scene ironically. This irony is, of course, primarily directed at the old-fashioned, 'naive' daytime soap, made for females, but as the episode evolves, the irony is also established in relation to the 'real' fiction, *Beverly Hills 90210*. I have shown this clip in many fora, and it has been met with giggles and laughter every time. The irony is more obvious later in the episode, when one of the series' female leads sings along to a Madonna hit and gets many people in a diner to act as if they were taking part in a musical. So my point is this: In *Beverly Hills 90210*, the series' own text sets the stage for a number of the ironically-distanced viewer attitudes that one can see among a large part of the series' audience. The series displays a narrative form typical of the TV series produced for young audiences in the 1990s. And this narrative form is even more highly developed in a contemporary series like *Ally MacBeal*.

Text and Reception

Since the middle of the 1980s, a number of thorough reception studies have shown convincingly that many media consumers are actively interpretative when they are apparently passively passing time in front of the TV or have their eyes glued to a magazine (Radway 1984, Aug. 1985, 1986; Brown 1994). On the other hand, there is a conspicuous lack of studies weighting textual analysis and the interpretation of a media text as highly as the observation and interpretation of consumer reception. This also applies to a number of researchers who place high theoretical priority on the textual analysis of reception (Brunsdon 1989: 120-126). Even though Jostein Gripsrud, for example, in *The Dynasty Years* (Gripsrud, 1995), claims that he will analyse the text of the series, he actually only analyses a random and very small sample of the series. This has a natural explanation: Serialized fictions like sitcoms or soap operas present texts of vast dimensions. In the case of *Beverly Hills 90210*, we have ten seasons (1990-2000) of approximately thirty-four episodes each: That makes at least 300 episodes of forty-five minutes each

– or approximately 255 hours of ‘text’ that must be watched and analysed. In my research, I choose to watch every minute not once but twice, and then I choose one or two characteristic episodes from each season to put through a thorough textual analysis. One could also single out, for instance, episode number four and fourteen of each season or the season premiere as especially important. The point is the following: When we work with serialized media-texts or electronic or printed matter, we cannot just choose randomly. Of course certain traits are often similar, but modern serialization most often tells us not only a number of short stories, but also a long story that many of the short stories refer to or repeat once or twice a year. Modern series have become more like serials; the examples are countless, from *Friends* to the Danish *Rejseholdet* (*Unit One* 2000ff) or the Swedish *Skärgårdsdoktoren* (*The Doctor in the Archipelago*, 1997ff).

The current research on popular, serial fiction for young people or on the fan culture of young people is usually ethnographically orientated and tends to disregard the text. Thus Dominique Pasquier, in a number of articles (Pasquier, 1995, 1997) on the French series *Helene et les garçons*, has described the series’ viewers and fans and the series’ function in their lives in an extremely detailed and interesting manner without ever touching on the nature of the text.

E. Graham McKinley (1997) has observed and interviewed 36 female *Beverly Hills 90210* fan-viewers, and has made a discursive analysis showing that, in their talk about the series, the girls become co-producers of a patriarchal, hegemonic construction of identity that represses women. McKinley summarizes some of the same episodes that I have subjected to more detailed analysis (Povlsen 1996a, 1996b, 1999). While I emphasize the ambiguous, polysemic statements in the series, she emphasizes its patriarchal and capitalistic character in her short thematic summaries. She acknowledges that the text is polysemic, but is of the opinion that viewers rule out the polysemic possibilities and interpret the text in an unequivocally self-repressive manner. However, at several points in the book, she returns to the fact that both she and her informants enjoy watching the series:

I must admit, I do appreciate the show’s many strengths, including its focused acting and seamless production quality... I never tire of the skill, efficiency and narrative momentum they demonstrate. [...] But my own experience as a single woman challenging traditional female roles in both domestic and professional spheres leads me to object strongly to a text that both naturalises dominant notions of female identity and conceals how difficult it can be to break out. (McKinley 1997:28)

One can easily over- or underestimate the viewing and interpretative competence of young people when we do not know precisely what it is they interpret, and when, as McKinley does, we appraise viewers’ spontaneous remarks in relation to a specific personal philosophy of life.

I will therefore make the case that media research must (again) take qualitative textual analysis as seriously as qualitative and quantitative studies of reception. I will assert that many physical and linguistic stylizations and stagings, many of the interpretative constructions that youth make and that they may argue they have themselves reached by negotiation and evaluation, are written into the text itself. I also doubt the constructive value of reducing text and interpretation to fixed statements and measuring them in relation to a certain practice, e.g., following the fashion in swimsuits – as E. Graham McKinley does. Many of the fictional series of the 1990s are well planned and well written, also in the sense that they speak to an audience of well-experienced viewers. If any generation could be designated as a generation of instinctive semioticians the generation born between 1975 and 1985 would be the prime candidate. This audience can appreciate a well-turned remark, a well-written dialogue, and can see through and predict a traditional plot of equilibrium – problem – problem-evolvment – and –solution with a new equilibrium.

Modern series fiction is, on the one hand, simply narrated and transparently constructed. On the other hand, it offers the experienced viewer a number of extra meanings and ambiguities that lay a trail of possible interpretative constructions that the young, practised viewers then make with great delight, fostered, among other things, by the feeling of being able to see through the whole thing. Their manner of reception is thus often ironic, humorous, or in other ways distanced and self-reflective. Yet they often swallow the bait prepared by the producer, the authors, and the directors of the series, who have a clear goal in mind. While some young people ironize over the series and apparently distance themselves from it, they still imitate it and identify themselves with it, because this double attitude to the plot and narrative style of the series is already written into it, as shown in the example at the beginning of this article. This doubleness may appear in the dialogue, in the style, and in narrative styles and themes that set the scene for distance and introspection. In the introductory example, it is a question of a fiction in the fiction; at other times there can be pronounced ironic layers in the series, elements of pastiche, exaggeratedly unequivocal episodes, or comical and farcical episodes that mark a distance to the self-importance of the genre. Many of the clearest examples have become “classics”; many viewers know them by heart, and refer to them when they are with friends who watch *Beverly Hills 90210*.

For the researcher, it takes considerable time to attain the same level of competence as the viewers who watch each episode many times. If we also hope to carry out qualitative studies of reception, which themselves can provide an almost limitless amount of material (Geraghty 1998), we find ourselves with serious, often insoluble, problems regarding system and material. These, however, are problems we should solve regularly, because only a method that “mimes” a major part of the viewers’ intake can capture what they get out of watching the series. Some viewers, of course, watch

only some episodes, and only watch them once; but many others, as shown by both my own and others' studies, including McKinley's (1997), watch episodes of series several times each. In Denmark, the most popular episodes from *Beverly Hills 90210* have been rerun six times since 1993; girls especially have often gathered to watch videos of episodes at get-togethers, as a prelude to parties, and so on. After the year 2000, the series has been rerun for the fifth and the sixth time in the afternoon so that new generations of mostly girls (the series now has a preponderance of female viewers) have been introduced to the universe of the series, and the older girls have enjoyed revisiting it. Even though the ratings are declining, the series is – in constant competition with *Ally MacBeal* – the most popular foreign fiction on a top-ten scale of popular television programs among Danish adolescents. *Ally MacBeal* has replaced *Beverly Hills 90210* in the popular series slot on Wednesday evenings on the Danish TV2 – followed by *Friends*. But neither *Friends* nor *Ally MacBeal* are half as popular as *Beverly Hills 90210* was around 1995-1996. Only the Danish series *Rejseholdet (Unit One)* is more popular – it is the absolute favourite among the population in general. Thus, for ten years *Beverly Hills 90210* has been an important factor and one of the most common general references in Danish girls' and youth cultures. We are dealing with a series whose sign of quality is the well-written dialogue, and with viewers who, for the most part, know the "text" – that is, the series – very well, as a result of many, repeated viewings. Added to this is a group that watches the series more extensively. I will not claim that I have analysed the series in the same manner as the intensive viewers, but text analysis is the only tool I have to reach the level of competence, in relation to the text, of that group of viewers.

Beverly Hills 90210: A Series of the 1990s – and After?

The series *Beverly Hills 90210* was a "made in the USA" teen-soap with solid international success. It was shown on Wednesday evenings from 8:00 to 9:00 on the Fox TV channel in the US from October 1990 to December 2000. The series is produced by *Spelling Productions WorldVision*, and is thus the successor to 1980s' series such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. But it is very different from its predecessors, among other things because the producer's goal from the start was to shape a series that would appeal to young people from eighteen to forty, to both men and women, and also to the well educated, and to those who were on their way to becoming well educated. The series succeeded so well in this aim that it has acquired a number of American, Australian, British and French imitators, among others the series *Melrose Place* (from 1992; also created by Darren Star), which has become very popular in the US, though not equally popular in Denmark. The series has had a decisive effect on other series that have been successful among young and

younger viewers in the well-to-do Western world in the 1990s. *Ally MacBeal* was produced to fill the slot of *Melrose Place* on the Fox Channel and to hold on to the youngish, well-educated and gender-mixed audiences.

The Danish TV2, which is a public service TV channel, partially financed by advertising, bought all three series. *Beverly Hills 90210* was sent from March 1992. It was an immediate success in Denmark. From 1992 to the autumn of 1996, it had an average of approximately a million viewers per episode, out of a population of five million. It was first shown on Thursdays, then Wednesday evenings from 8:00 to 9:00. It was moved to Saturday afternoons in the spring of 1997, and lost viewers. It has been rerun five times in the afternoons; selected episodes have been rerun seven times. The reruns have so many viewers that they have constantly been on the top-ten list of programs seen by young people from twelve to twenty-four years of age. More than 90% of the generation of women born between the beginning of the 1970s and the middle of the 1980s have followed the series over a period of years, while approximately 50% of the men from the same generation have followed it (Gallup for TV2, Fridberg et al. 1997). The series began as a high school series; later the characters went to college and either graduated or continued their studies. The viewers have followed almost the same pattern; they have also become older and better educated with the passage of ten years.

Beverly Hills 90210 has – like later series such as *Ally MacBeal* (1997-) and *Sex and the City* (1998-) – become especially popular in Denmark, Holland and other countries where it is shown with subtitles. *Beverly Hills 90210* was a commercial, mainstream, middlebrow series that presented “the Californian way of life”, with emphasis on consumption and lifestyle, but it was less glamorous than the Spelling productions of the 1980s like *Dallas* (1978-1991) and *Dynasty* (1981-89). *Beverly Hills 90210* was a niche production for high school adolescents – girls and boys. It was produced at exactly the right time – when advertisers were on the lookout for younger audiences. The series became a success, one of the longest running prime-time soaps ever. But during the 1990s, audiences and advertisers changed. The new systems of cable and satellite TV gave many more people access to many more channels – and series. And a number of other high school and college soaps were produced – as well as sitcoms of a new generation like *Friends*. This meant that suddenly much more television fiction was available for young audiences between twelve and twenty-two years of age. *Beverly Hills 90210* was the first American series to attract the attractive, youthful and well-educated unisex audiences that were soon to become good consumers. And it will probably be the last one for many years. Most countries have developed local serials (a fixed number of episodes, often six or twelve) and series (an unfixed number of episodes), and the many new late-1990s generation of American series are of another kind. Again, they have become niche productions. New teen-soaps try to gather a wide audience but up until now have failed – reality television like *Big Brother* and *Popstars*

have captured the audience between the ages of twelve and eighteen. And television producers all over the Western world are now producing series for eight- to twelve-year-olds: The impossible target group, as they are called. In the meantime, new niche productions for the young and young adults in their twenties are keeping the attention of audiences that were trained to love television with *Beverly Hills 90210*.

Beverly Hills 90210 was less glamorous than *Sex and the City* (1998-), which was created and produced by the creator of *Beverly Hills 90210*, Darren Star. The four female main characters are not twenty something anymore but thirty something – and single. *Sex and the City* takes place in New York, and the ‘plot’ centres on designer clothes and the single life in the most modern of all metropolises in the Western world. In a sense, *Sex and the City* is the logical continuation of the series *Beverly Hills 90210* – minus the men. The style, the dialogue and the settings are much the same. We are in a hypermodernity of quick, smart and ironical remarks spoken by bodies that are model-like and wear designer dresses in a designer city. Not surprisingly, the series is mostly watched and loved by women from twenty to forty-five. *Ally MacBeal*, which was produced to fill the slot that *Beverly Hills 90210* left on the Fox channel, takes place in Boston. Again, the city is an important ‘character’ in the series – but this series is not a female series like *Sex in the City*; it is a unisex series and the most important scenography in the series is the unisex toilet in the fictive firm of lawyers. The lawyers are male and female, but in spite of the unisex bathroom and ideology of equal opportunities for the sexes, the firm is directed by two male partners with a number of female aspirants to partnership, including the single, thirty-something Ally MacBeal, the main character. All the characters are neurotic and childish – the firm is a kindergarten of borderline personalities; evidently the viewers are not expected to take them seriously. The style of the series is concise in that it shows metaphors in a literal way: When Ally MacBeal feels the desire to undress a sexy man, he is magically undressed for a few seconds. When she hears inner voices, we see small men talking to her; when Ling, another female lawyer, scowls, she actually grunts like a lioness, and so on and so forth. Elements that we only know from cartoons or surrealist avant-garde films are used in this series to signal irony, an irony that is already expected in series for the young and well educated, but that was introduced to children from around the age of ten in 1990 when *Beverly Hills 90210* began. Now it has become a matter of style, such as in the novel *Glamorama* by Brett Easton Ellis (1998), which describes and criticizes the world of TV series and models and actors in the US and in Europe. One of the examples that Ellis refers to again and again is – *Beverly Hills 90210*.

Beverly Hills 90210 in Denmark

From its beginning in 1992, *Beverly Hills 90210* became especially popular in Denmark among twelve- to sixteen-year-old girls from not particularly well-educated families. They watched it with their mothers and sisters. During 1995 and 1996 as the series' characters graduated from high school, it became extremely popular among seventeen- to twenty-four-year-olds and twenty-four to thirty-one-year-olds in larger towns with institutions of higher education. It was especially students from the "Gymnasiums" (high school) and universities who followed the series, and its viewers were markedly better educated than the average population. The only group that, on the whole, was not interested in the series consisted of uneducated men over forty years of age. "Even my grandmother is wild about Beverly Hills," wrote a Danish high school student in an essay in 1996.

Beverly Hills clubs and groups were formed at gymnasiums and universities. Most gymnasiums had Beverly Hills "hate" or "love" parties, cafés and carnivals; and the tradition of the prom made its entrance into Danish gymnasiums, where it was formerly unknown. Most dorms had a Beverly Hills bar or club. Thursday evening, when Beverly Hills was on, became in the early 1990s the evening to go out, whereas it used to be Friday evening. Groups of young people watched Beverly Hills together at home or in the dorm, and then went out. The series became a social event with wide penetration, both among a certain generation, and beyond it, e.g. among teachers and parents.

In many groups and clubs, young people developed ironic and apparently distanced observer positions. A number of social rituals were built around the series, from drinking games to clubs where young viewers arrived dressed as love or hate figures from the series. Numerous jokes and witty remarks were produced about the series as it was watched. University students spoke of the series as a cult series or a kitsch phenomenon. People said, "The series is so bad, it's good." (Hornetal 1995, Rasmussen et al. 1996). It became the series they loved to hate.

At the same time as this ironic and apparently distanced reception could be seen, the series dictated the latest fashions. Every high school class had its girls with Kelly hairstyles, Donna bare navels and rings on their thumbs; and many female university students wore Beverly Hills necklaces and dresses – fashions they could buy as cheap copies in the Hennes & Mauritz clothing chain, among other places. The series was shown from three to six months later in Denmark and the rest of Europe than in the US, so clothing manufacturers had time to copy the designs. Even though the adults who were interested in the phenomenon had the impression that young people expressed a general distance to the series, a casual visit in any Danish high school classroom proved that the series had had an effect on young people's consumption, on their conception of what was chic. This interest in the clothes, designs and furniture presented in a series has developed since

Beverly Hills 90210; it is an important attraction in series like *Friends* and *Ally MacBeal* and the most important one in *Sex and the City*. American series can no longer capture big audiences in Denmark; they have become niche productions. But the viewers that do follow the above-mentioned series are well educated and have a good income, and they use the series from the hypermodern metropolises to adjust their tastes and get new inspiration for body and home. They use the series as if they were magazines on modern living and style. And designers use the series for product placement. This is not a totally new phenomenon, but it has never before been so important. It developed during the first years of *Beverly Hills 90210*.

During the first seasons of *Beverly Hills 90210*, a number of merchandising products were in circulation: posters, T-shirts, magazines, calendars, books and videos with classic episodes and interviews, recipes and pictures of the characters in the series. These vanished around 1994 and were replaced by CDs with soundtracks from episodes with real-life celebrities like The Rolling Stones, Luther Vandross, The Cardigans, and other pop musicians, and by CD-ROMs with background information, video sequences, and no references to literature. In 1996, the Internet replaced fan magazines and other publications in print. There was a varying (large) number of web sites with gossip, news, casting guides, background information, and summaries of episodes, some with detailed interpretations that could bring a summary of an episode up to 12 to 15 tightly written pages. Few web sites were traditional advertising pages from Fox TV or Spelling Productions; most were established and kept up to date by groups of university students in, for example, the US, Germany, Poland, Finland or Denmark. The tone here was ironic, and the episodes were analysed in detail. But at the same time, many of the web sites contained attempts at writing dialogue for episodes, and serious attempts were made to guess how the plot would continue and what the complications would be. The same development can be seen around series like *Ally MacBeal* and *Sex and the City*. It is evident that the Internet has become the most important secondary media system concerning the series. Of course, magazines still tell their gossip stories from life behind the screen, but the web pages have developed rapidly – both the official pages produced by the producers of the series and the unofficial ones. On the official web pages, one can buy DVD's with episodes from earlier seasons and CD's with soundtracks and clips with designer costumes. Merchandising for the audience over 10 has changed during the 1990s.

Danish Children and Young People Watch *Beverly Hills 90210*

I began my research on the reception of *Beverly Hills 90210* with observations of twenty-two children and young people between the ages of nine

and nineteen who watched the series regularly from 1993 to 1995; and I found, as did Pasquier (1995, 1997) and others, three viewer positions in relation to the series. The youngest viewers identified with the plot and actors; those who were a little older (twelve- to sixteen-year-olds) watched the plot with a certain distance, but with a high degree of identification with the elements of style and fashion. They watched hairstyles, shirts, beds, cars and basketball shoes. The oldest watched the show with an apparent distance: they could predict the plot, they thought the characters were ridiculous, and they made ironic comments and jokes, but were at the same time the most faithful viewers. I do not think they were critical and oppositional viewers; they loved to hate the series and were connected to it through ambivalence and fascination.

Beverly Hills 90210, *Friends*, *Ally MacBeal* and *Sex and the City* have become so popular in countries like Denmark and Holland for the precise reason that the many viewers who are relatively well educated and well versed in the English language can view the series with irony and humour; partly because the series are (too) American, partly because the ironic and humorous points in the often well-written dialogue are actually highlighted by the often poorly translated subtitles' clumsy efforts to catch the point made by the originals. Another reason for the popularity of *Beverly Hills*, and series like it, was that it simultaneously allowed the viewers to identify with it and watch from a distanced, ironic position. The irony was most often based on an experience of affect. The ironic reception allowed identification and concurrent distance; viewers often expressed a certain irritation or rejection of the identification and the series' universe. This is a loving critical position, which does not contain alternatives or opposing conceptions, but which expresses a certain displeasure with the pleasure. Being an ironic viewer means that one identifies, but at the same time reflects on one's identification. And many well-educated viewers in late modernity feel this need for and the pleasure of self-reflectiveness.

On a basic rhetorical level, the irony problematizes the relation between what is said and what is meant (often the opposite). The irony problematizes the relation between signifier and signified: to be an ironic viewer is to be a very linguistically aware viewer. The ironic viewer is a viewer who both allows herself to be caught up by something in the series and at the same time stays cool. Irony can express ambivalence, but cannot escape it. This position has only become more evident during the years and with the series that have passed since the popularity of *Beverly Hills 90210* was at its peak. Today, girls from the age of seven onwards look at the reruns of *Beverly Hills 90210* in the afternoons and learn how to look and to view in a cool way. This gaze or this position that they train in the afternoons is the perfect way to look at prime-time series like *Ally MacBeal*. Younger girls are normally not allowed to watch *Sex and the City*, but the high school students that do watch it late in the evenings train their cool gaze and elaborate it during their viewing. For the humoristic or ironic dialogues in *Sex and the*

City are – when they are not sexual – concerned with how to stay cool and look cool.

Part of the irony can also be rooted in the social communication in the group of young viewers. “Irony happens” (Hutcheon, 1995:5). This social irony develops in a discursive fellowship and becomes here a common denominator that at the same time distinguishes this fellowship from other groups of viewers. But it is important to maintain that, even though we are dealing with a popular, commercial, mainstream text, the text itself contains an ambiguity, a consistently bi- or polysemy, capable of two or more interpretations, which (co) produce the ironic audience positions and which aid in prompting and furthering the socially produced irony.

The Text of *Beverly Hills 90210*

Any fictional text, including popular media texts, must be understood in terms of the tradition in which it is written. As Peter Brooks (1976) has convincingly shown, melodrama has historically been a popular form of fiction, informing the audience of certain basic moral values in words and music; and doing it in such an exaggerated and often redundant way that everyone can understand it. The melodrama is a democratic tradition, because the narrative method consistently builds on repetition and postponement – similar to the children’s theatre tradition that Gitlin (1995:138) maintains Aaron Spelling has always used in his soaps: “Show it, then tell it”. Brooks emphasizes that melodrama is about manners, about how one should behave, etiquette: This is how you speak, move, eat, sit, get up, dress; this is how men look at women or women look at men.

This didactic element is important. In melodramatic popular fiction, every generation of young people and older children can learn and negotiate with themselves, the text and other viewers on how to behave in keeping with the times; how to stage their bodies, their sexuality; how to behave toward parents, teachers, boyfriends, girlfriends; and how to smile, stand, walk and express certain central feelings and attitudes – in contrast to other generations, sexes and groups. *Beverly Hills 90210* and other teen-soaps can be read in a continuity of popular fiction from Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) to Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* (1936, filmed 1939), from popular fiction in weekly magazines to cartoons. The difference is that, today, young people are more likely to watch electronic fictions on a screen than to read them in a book or magazine (Fridberg et al., 1997). But the text is still important. Texts cannot be seen or read in just any way. The text shapes one frame of reference for interpretation; viewer competence shapes another.

As a starting point for analysis, I watched all the episodes in the first seven seasons of *Beverly Hills 90210*; first, as mentioned earlier, together with a group of children and young people, the second and third times alone with a note-

book and frequent use of the slow-motion and repeat buttons. I took notes on dialogue, camera positions, clips and scene shifts, background music, and not least the relationship between repetition and postponement in each episode.

In a way, the episodes are all exactly the same. They are all constructed according to the same fixed pattern, and they are all the same length: forty-four and a half minutes. First there is a trailer, which is changed entirely or in part for every new season. Then there is a short overture to this episode's "problem". Trailer and overture take at most three minutes. After this beginning, there is usually a commercial break in the US; in Europe, however, there is usually just a clear change of scene or clip. After this, the problem is unfolded, first in a main plot, then as a rule in two subplots with a theme running parallel to the main plot. This takes some time – approximately fifteen minutes. Then comes a new break for commercials, or a marked clip, and a new sequence unfolds the problem yet again – and again in both plot and subplots. This sequence is also quite long, from fifteen to twenty minutes, and usually ends with a moral. Again, there is a break for commercials, or an obvious change of scene, and the episode is concluded with a harmonious happy ending, which only takes a few minutes. This is a classical, Aristotelian way of staging a drama – a narrative pattern that is still present in all American series.

The repetitions and postponements arise in the continuing play of plot and subplots and in the play between dialogue and picture. First, something is said or narrated in the plot, then in the subplots, and then it is shown. This is where the series' didactic and democratic element unfolds. Everything is said and shown so many times that even small children or poor readers who do not understand English, and who have difficulty reading the subtitles, can follow the story line. Older children, or those who are better at reading and languages, can delight in being able to predict, and can lean back and reflect on, perhaps ironize over, the individual media texts.

Most episodes have an "issue" – a problem to be debated. Often, the subject of use or misuse is treated: the use or misuse of food, alcohol, goods, boy-friends/girlfriends, friends, studies or religion. And it is often a word, a concept or a sentence that starts the problematizing. A typical example is the episode entitled *Slumber Party*, number thirteen in the first season, written by the series' creator, Darren Star, who was the author of many episodes in the series' early seasons until he started concentrating on *Melrose Place* (1992-1998), which is a spin-off product from *Beverly Hills 90210*, and after that *Sex and the City* (1998-)

Slumber Party begins, as do most episodes, in the morning. The soap typically imitates the course of a day, beginning in a morning and ending in an evening. This morning the scene takes place in the Walsh family's home, in the kitchen. The twins, Brandon and Brenda, are having breakfast. Brandon is surprised at Brenda's idea of having a slumber party. He thinks that ninth graders do that sort of thing, and implies that Brenda is being childish – she's in high school now. Brenda defends herself by saying that this isn't a slum-

ber party, but a “night of female bonding, right Mom?” The mother, Cindy, confirms this from the kitchen counter, where she is preparing the breakfast she serves to the youngsters. The father, Jim, comes hurriedly into the kitchen with his briefcase. He is late, too late for breakfast. Cindy complains that he is setting a bad example for the children. Brenda reminds him that he has promised to stay upstairs this evening because of her slumber party. Jim asks if that sort of thing doesn’t belong in the ninth grade. The camera focuses on Brandon, who throws Brenda a triumphant and approving look, and the scene ends with a close up of Brenda’s face. She keeps her “mask”. The scene is built up in a spiral; the camera begins with a close-up of Brandon’s face, but his reaction is a reaction to Brenda’s activity. She is the one who has put the crucial words ‘slumber party’ into circulation. She is the one who has been the cause of a certain division of the sexes in the kitchen: on one side, we have father and son who unwittingly meet in the same misunderstanding of Brenda’s words; on the other side, we have mother and daughter. Cindy consciously supports her daughter, both in the picture and in the verbal exchange. Thus they show the “female bonding” which Brenda has spoken of in the dialogue (tell it, show it). The father also supports the son, but without being aware of it until afterwards. So on the one hand, we have two women, who reflectively support each other, and on the other, two men, who do the same thing, but without knowing it. They share the interpretation of the word that Brenda has put into circulation in order to give it a new meaning.

The word in circulation follows along to the next scene, which takes place at “West Beverly High”. The camera follows Brandon again as he goes over to Andrea in the office of the school paper. She is the editor of the school paper; Brandon is a journalist on the paper. He calls her “chief”; that is, indicates that she is his boss, but tongue-in-cheek. He has written an article on a tennis match and implies that it would not interest Andrea (i.e., women are not interested in sports). He asks her what she is doing that evening. She answers, “attending a women’s conference at your house”. Brandon asks if she is referring to Brenda’s slumber party, and Andrea answers, “It isn’t a slumber party”. That is, Andrea gives the word a feminist interpretation. The scene closes with a close-up of her, and she repeats, “It is not a slumber party”. The sexes interpret the word differently; the feminist version is now established.

However, the play on words continues in the next scene, where Brenda and her friends Kelly and Donna are standing in front of the school lockers. Kelly asks Brenda, “Are you sure this thing isn’t a slumber party?” Brenda explains again about the “night of female bonding”, and Kelly asks if they then can invite some guys after they have “bonded, n’all”. But Brenda defends her point: They will neither talk nor think about guys that evening, they won’t worry about how they look, there won’t be any guys around. This is one of the many cases where the narrative instance is clearly demonstrated in the half long shot camera angle, which is not motivated by the action or the people acting here. The camera, like a pointing finger, says: note what they are saying, it’s important (tell it, show it)! The camera now

pans over to two boys, David and Scott, the two younger nerds, who listen, watch the girls, and decide to turn up in the evening and play Peeping Toms. Here, they have already placed themselves in the position of Peeping Toms. The camera and the dialogue assume here that the girls do not agree on the meaning and interpretation of the word; and the camera demonstrates that they cannot avoid the masculine gaze, just as they cannot avoid the camera: precisely because it comes from somewhere they hadn't calculated on, from the nerds who are a year younger than themselves.

But there are also other views. Kelly's problem is that she has arranged to spend the evening with a girlfriend who is older than the other girls. Kelly doesn't want to invite her to anything as childish as a slumber party, but Brenda sticks to her guns and invites Kelly's older friend, Amanda, to the party. The dialogue shows that Kelly has a more adult, sexualized, and traditionally feminine viewpoint, which sees a slumber party as an embarrassing, childish phenomenon, precisely because the opposite sex is not allowed.

The final dialogue in the scene takes place between the friends Brandon and Steve. Once again the camera pans along the school corridor and catches Brandon and Steve on their way down a staircase. Steve teases Brandon about being thrown out of his own house because of Brenda's slumber party. Steve suggests that he and Brandon go nightclubbing together and find their own girls in pyjamas. The three girlfriends meet the two friends. Brenda tells Steve not to feel bad about not being invited to this party – he's used to being stood up. Donna remarks, "that left you in the dust".

The sequence is typical and interesting because, in the first place, it sets the scene for the entire episode: the rest is repetition and postponement. The experienced viewer will know that the boys in this episode can't cope with the girls because the girls are better at inventing interpretations of the word which has been put into circulation: slumber party. The girls can gleefully run up the stairs and look down on the boys in the corridor below. That points to another typical element: Problems arise in *Beverly Hills 90210* because a word or a sentence or an occurrence is understood or interpreted differently by the people involved. In the first seasons, the girls are better at constructing adequate interpretations than the boys are; they (the boys) usually understand words or situations as they are normally understood. In the first place, this construction suggests that there are always many different possible interpretations; in the second place, it almost forces the viewer to interpret for herself, or at least to choose sides in the interpretative constructions taking place on screen.

In the early seasons of *Beverly Hills 90210*, viewers are taught to look with scepticism at the usual interpretations; they are encouraged to make their own interpretative constructions, which either reflect or exceed those of the characters. To accept words or actions at face value is shown as a suspicious or at least naive undertaking; there are always many possibilities present. In this case, it will be observed that the girls' interpretation starts the action; the boys are not able to establish their own interpretations. On

the other hand, the girls are forced to admit that they cannot keep the other sex and its understanding of words and situations out of their lives. The girls' gathering turns out to be about how boys interpret things. Most of the successful teen-soaps from the 1990s that I know of have this intense awareness of how to interpret words or sentences or situations. There is always another way to understand a text; any statement should be interpreted and is, at the same time, already interpreted in the series' text. It is at once extremely ambiguous and very easy to interpret. Later, series like *Ally MacBeal* work in exactly the same way; here the struggles over how to interpret are often carried out in the lawsuits, which often focus on sexual harassment cases or cases concerning normal/abnormal behaviour.

A similar though different example can be pointed out in the sixth season. The characters now go to college and have moved away from home. The episode begins in a plane. We see Kelly sitting alone in the plane, reading a magazine. A young man contacts her, sits next to her, and starts flirting wildly with her, and we see a melodramatic seduction scene, played out so quickly that it takes on the appearance of a pastiche. After a number of ambiguous and sexually charged compliments, the young man kisses Kelly and invites her to join the Taj-Mahal club. Initiation can take place in the plane's washroom, and the young man goes to the washroom. After a moment's hesitation, seconded by the conspiratorial smiles and knowing looks and expressions of co-passengers, Kelly follows. In the washroom, we learn that the young man is Colin, Kelly's new boyfriend, whom she met during the summer in New York. The seduction scene in the cabin was pure theatre, put on for the benefit of the passengers and the viewers, who do not yet know Colin. So yet again we find a form of fiction in the fiction, where viewers are tricked and told that the meaning here was completely different from what they thought if they naively swallowed the bait. The series has played an ironic trick on the viewers. The story line is pursued throughout the season, viewers constantly being made to doubt Colin's intentions: Are they honourable or illusionary? An aura, which can be read naively as true love or more ambiguously as "what is he up to?", is shaped around the character of Colin.

In his article on modern soaps from the 1990s (1995), Stephen Croft stresses that successful series texts have a number of characteristics in common:

- They must focus on everyday life.
- They must take place in suburbs of large Western cities.
- They must portray active and competent women.
- They must appeal to teenagers.
- They must portray young people who do not revolt against parents or school, but are "decent".
- Differences or problems must be negotiated, not solved radically.
- They must, above all, be well written, with a good, fast-paced dialogue.

My analyses show that the final point is the most important one. *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992, Jhaly & Lewis, 1992) first demonstrated the fast-paced, humorous or ironic competence that has become so crucial to the success of TV series (Roth-Lindberg, 1995: 24, 331). In *Beverly Hills 90210*, there are some examples like the above-mentioned one, some humorous, comedy-like episodes, some episodes that ritually follow the holidays: Christmas, Valentine's Day, Halloween, and so on, and then there are the more cinematic episodes that establish intertextual relations to series such as *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) and use cinematic effects such as flashbacks and mysterious occurrences. Generally speaking, the relationship between reality and fiction is problematized time and again, and the viewers are thus forced to be on guard: They must interpret the dialog; they must take the context into account. The series helps them by repeating and underlining the ambiguities; or by being so blatantly unequivocal that the opposite position is obvious from the text. Most viewers over ten years of age feel intelligent and proficient when they watch the series. They are rewarded by a feeling of relaxation and entertainment, because they are not only on a par with the series characters, but are even better interpreters. It seems to be the aim of the series to establish just this feeling in viewers. It brings about a "feel good" effect. Again the tendency is the same in later series.

My examples of texts are all from the overtures to episodes, as it is here that the meaning of words, sentences or scenes is problematized in relation to the ordinary meaning. In the course of the two long central scenes, a long line of interpretative positions is played out, finally concluding in a short, reconciliatory ending. The closer we come to the end of an episode, the more the text establishes meanings and the less it allows for ironic ambiguities. On the other hand, near-ridiculous scenes often arise when the closing lays down the problematized word's or concept's meaning in such a glaring and foreseeable manner that not even nine-year-old viewers are surprised. The closing thus establishes another possibility for an ironic viewer position in this blatant unambiguousness. Here the text becomes so outright and predictable, so unambiguous, that just this unambiguousness becomes a kind of opening or empty room in Umberto Eco's sense (Eco, 1979). Most viewers are forced to "smile and roll their eyes" (Essay 102:4), as it was put by one young woman who otherwise took the series very seriously. But here she establishes her position of ironic distance.

Essays on *Beverly Hills 90210*

I watch Beverly Hills myself; I like the series. I think it puts you in a good mood... I have heard it said that young people forget reality in favour of the glamorous American style, where anything is possible if you have the money, and that has been put forth as an argument for a hateful attitude to the series.

I have only one thing to say to that: Honestly, how naive do they think Danish youth are? Anyone with a reasonable amount of common sense can easily distinguish between film and reality (essay 128:3).

Thus writes a young woman in her first year at gymnasium. She is one of the approximately 300 fifteen- to twenty-year-old young Danes whom, with their teachers as go-betweens, I asked to write an essay of their own choice on the series *Beverly Hills 90210* in 1995 and 1996. Most of the 130 writers whose essays I have analysed in detail think they can make the basic distinction between fiction and reality without any trouble. It is, as the writer above also remarks, just that distinction in which the greater part of the Danish media debate has involved itself – often in such a simple form that I was forced to smile. But the style itself simplifies the relationship between fiction and reality, because the series has had an obvious and conspicuous effect on young people's real, everyday life: for example, it has shaped fashion; the same young people who ironize over the series and over the worries expressed in the public debate have, as mentioned earlier, bought summer dresses, had their hair cut and bought necklaces – fashions originating in the massive product positioning taking place in the episodes of the series.

I collected the essays in December 1995 and especially in the spring of 1996, when the series as a social event was at its height in Denmark. The essay material as a whole showed that the same three basic positions I had already seen in my observations of the broader age group also appeared among the slightly older viewers. Especially one group of women identified with the series; a group of boys and girls watched it as an initiation into a definite universe of style and fashion; and a group of linguistically well-founded students, dominated by young men, watched it with irony and distance. I had chosen to collect essays from the first stage of further education after the Danish nine-year elementary school, and my essays are thus from the first years of Danish Business schools; from a two-year course of secondary education, called HF; and from high schools (gymnasiums). The young people are between sixteen and twenty-two years of age, most of them between sixteen and eighteen. I have chosen the essays so that they are weighted with regard to sex, geographical distribution from the capital city to the provinces, and dispersion between the various types of institutions of further education.

Most of the essay writers agree that *Beverly Hills 90210* is a text that is very easy to read. One example among many reads:

Beverly Hills is good entertainment, something that interests young people. It doesn't require a great brain to watch it; there isn't much to think about. There isn't any great mystery for the viewer to solve. I think that is the reason why so many young people watch it. It's relaxation pure and simple. You sit down in front of the TV, turn it on, and go quietly into a coma (essay 85:2).

The same female writer later says that the series deals with good problems; one can learn something from its realistic portrayal of the problems and its realistic portrayal of the characters, but not from its unrealistic suggestions for solutions. As another female writer puts it: "The series' weakness might be that their problems always get solved in the end..." (essay 40:3) A male writer is both more distanced and more argumentative; he concludes: "As can probably be seen from this essay, there are a number of things in "Beverly" that I think are either ridiculous, too American, or just too much. But I still enjoy watching the series". (Essay 45:7)

One girl thinks that the series *Beverly Hills* is an expression of a change in the times. While the 1980s were stylish, the 1990s are "beer, football, true romance, and Beverly" (Essay 43:1). Bad taste has become good taste. She regards a series like *Beverly Hills* as modern on the outside and traditional on the inside: it tells a traditional story according to the home-homeless-home pattern, but does it in a modern way. She also points out that it is the enunciation, not the enunciated, that is interesting. That is what so many react to when they criticize the unrealistic closings. It is, of course, the closing that shapes "meaning" in the traditional analysis. My point would be the same as the one expressed in essay 43: It is the pleasurable play of enunciation – which takes place on the level of dialogue in particular, but also in the play between dialogue and picture, or in the play of media in the medium – which is so fascinating. So it doesn't matter that much that the series is "too much" on the level of the enunciated.

The same writer moves in her essay's three tightly written pages back and forth between the enunciated and enunciation in a way that clearly shows that she cannot clearly distinguish between them. She thinks, for example, that it is a good thing that the series takes up taboo subjects (the enunciated), that it is a bad thing that the endings are so unrealistic (the enunciated), that it is a good thing that the lines are smart and the lingo fresh (enunciation). But her own essay keeps trying to imitate the level of enunciation that she is so fascinated by. The introduction to the essay is actually in the form of a quote from one level of bad taste: the (amateur) song written for a special occasion, a Danish favourite and a connotation of working-class and lower middle-class taste:

Dylan is the lion bold,
while Brandon keeps it all on hold

Kelly is the beauty here,
and Brenda's heart holds Dylan dear

David dreams of stardom soon,
and Donna's heart he makes to swoon

Andrea studies of the "bard",
while Steve just thinks of playing hard

All of them we love to see,
on Mondays, here on our TV!

This is the only example of this type in my material, but it clearly shows an endeavour found in shorter or longer passages in most of the essays: They try to master the traditional form – which a Danish essay assignment is in itself – in a modern and/or deliberately kitsch fashion that displays the level of enunciation from the series, but in such a skewed manner that we have to smile at it, ironize over it. The male writer, no. 45, expresses the same idea thus: “It tells us things we don’t want to bother hearing in such a way that they are exciting” (Essay 45: 4).

Examples like this show that the viewers know very well that the enunciated in the series is traditional while its enunciation is modern. They know that they “shouldn’t” be caught up in the enunciation, but by imitating the enunciation in an essay they can communicate the pleasure they feel on the level of enunciation and (hide) a traditional identification with the level of the enunciated. Even essays that apparently kept their distance with an ironic and critical attitude to the series were influenced by the media text’s model and narrative style.

We are thus, in my view, too biased when we, with Umberto Eco, describe the young as “instinctive semioticians” (Eco, 1984/1986:210) and sophisticated media surfers – and, on the other hand, we are also too biased if we – like McKinley – accuse them of not acting effectively against patriarchy, but of partaking in it themselves as producers of oppressive interpretations of a text. The generation after generation X has bound life and pleasure to enunciation, to the play of the signifier and the signified, which is both quite traditional and quite modern. The young viewers who have written essays for me have, for the most part, identified with the enunciation, but their essays show that enunciation, in spite of ironic games and humorous ruses and imitations of style, is bound to the enunciated in a way that they think they can hide.

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Good Friends, Merry Fighters

Barbro Johansson

In this article, I will examine children's computer game playing in relation to different discourses about childhood, violence and play and in relation to how individuals, owing to different experiences, feelings and moral judgements, position themselves within these discourses. I will take my point of departure in children's points of view and begin by looking at a computer game situation.

The most common computer activity among the studied children was computer game playing. Almost all children had tried it, and many of them devoted several hours every week to computer games. Many of the children had their favourite genres: driving games, strategy games (e.g., *Sim City*), platform games (e.g., *Super Mario Bros*), or action games (e.g., *Doom*). In many games there are elements of violence and death, either as a peripheral part or as the main activity, and the presence of such elements generally worries adults. The worries concern how children might be affected by the violence – whether they might become aggressive, indifferent or unable to understand what pain and death really mean. Other adults claimed that computer game playing should be interpreted in the same way as all children's play – an arena where children have fun together and where imagination is the main theme – and that children are quite capable of differentiating violence and death in reality and in play.

Playing Bonkheads

One afternoon, I visited two brothers, Ian, 11, and Anders, 9, together with two of their friends Erik, 11, and Henrik, 9. At Ian and Anders' home, there were two computers and the boys played several games: *NHL 97*, *Fifa Soccer*, *Backpacker*, *Air Combat*, *Team Park* and *Bonkheads*. Ian and Anders were both interested in sports and liked playing football and ice hockey, both in reality and in computer games. In the beginning, Ian showed me the games

and explained how they work. He was very instructive and concerned about giving me full information. It was not until they started playing *Bonkheads*, a platform game with humour and fighting as the main content, that the interest actually turned from informing me to enthusiastic playing.

Bonkheads

"The story so far: Deep below the surface of the earth, deeper even than the belly of hell, the citizens of Trollsville were in a state of emergency. A massive earthquake had just ripped open a passage from the earth's crust all the way to Trollsville. The elders of Trollsville had quickly called a meeting to discuss the impending danger of an invasion of surface creatures.

It was decided that while this rift remained open, the twelve Underworlds of the earth would have to be defended. A call rang out for the strongest and most courageous of all Trollsville's citizens to defend the motherland. Only two stepped forward, well stumbled actually, and accepted this dangerous task. The Bonkheads brothers, while not Trollsville's brightest or swiftest inhabitants, were more than willing. Of course it was only some time later, when their ears had finally cleared from ringing the emergency bell, that Grag and Thog realized that the elders had said "protect the rift" not "collect the gift". However, with promises of medals of honor and a case of chewing gum, the brothers began their ascent towards the surface.

Armed with only an incredible tolerance for pain and rock solid craniums, Grag and Thog made their way to Surfaceville..."

When the game starts, the trolls Grag and Thog walk in from the edge. The player guides them, with the help of the computer keys, up and down the platforms to make them escape from or defeat the pests. These are of different shape and have different degrees of difficulty. On the lower levels there are dogs and racoons, which can easily be defeated; later on come bees, spiders and tires and other figures, which require more energy to be put out of action. You fight the pest by letting the troll jump and hit its head ("bonk") in the above platform, where the enemy stands. When it falls down, you make the troll jump up on the platform and kick the body away. This must be done immediately, otherwise the enemy will start living again. There are also various gems hidden behind platforms, which you can find by "bonking" them. These gems can make the troll jump higher, move faster etc. There is also the possibility to jump on a box labelled "TNT", which makes all pests drop dead simultaneously, but this solution should only be chosen in cases of emergency, as there is a limit to how many times you can use TNT. When all enemies are dead, the player moves on to the next level. On every level you are given three attempts, three "lives", before you lose and have to start from the beginning.

Most computer games are constructed for only one person to play at a time. When two children sit in front of the game they solve this by turning to different play rules, known from other play contexts. One rule is that the

owner has the first-hand right to the computer. In every visit I made, the child who was at home was the first one to play. Other play rules concern justice and the right for everyone to enjoy oneself. The children usually solved this by taking turns, e.g., by playing one level each or deciding which game to play alternately, or by making democratic decisions about what to play. In *Bonkheads*, however, there is the possibility of being two players, who guide one troll each and co-operate in the task of defeating the pests. Here Anders and Henrik play:

The game starts and the little *Bonkhead* tune runs over and over. The boys guide one troll each and start to fight the pests, who come in from the top. The space is limited, both on the screen and in front of it:

Anders: Mind yourself, Henrik, you must take the other edge!

Henrik: I've got you! Oh my, here I am! Jiiii! One of them is coming to life! Lovely, I've got it! Growl, growl.

Anders: That one is mine, Henrik!

Henrik: Yeah, now I'm going to knock you.

Anders: You can't.

They conquer the pests and move on to the next level. Henrik hums and talks all the time.

Henrik: Yes that's my edge. One up. I must have it. Ouch! One! Two! Three! I've got you. Four! Look, I must have the last one, no, jump! Growl, growl. Anders is quieter; he does not talk to the characters of the game, as Henrik does. Then Anders fails for the third time, he "dies" and Henrik goes on alone, with the help of Anders' advice.

Henrik: Ouch, here comes a quick lad. Now I've got you. Why go! Ouch, there's an ugly cat. Hey! Noo! Now I'm going to take TNT.

Anders: That's not really necessary. Take the money.

Henrik takes the TNT anyway.

Anders: It didn't work. Why didn't you take the money?

When there are two players, they need to co-operate, both about the task of putting the pests out of action and about sharing the space by the keyboard, which is rather limited. One way to interpret the above quotation is to consider it as a play situation, where the participants negotiate and compete with regard to how to define the goals of the play. The two goals, which can be distinguished here, were to reach the highest levels possible and to have as much fun as possible. Anders tried to organize the fighting; he wanted them to take responsibility for one edge each. It seems as if the reason for this organizing was, on the one hand, to make the combat more effective and, on the other, to guarantee the two boys the same opportunity to fight. Henrik did not seem terribly eager to set up rules. Right from the start, he showed great enthusiasm for playing and stepped right into the realms of the game with cries of delight and joyful role taking. He even extended the conditions of the game by suggesting a fight between the co-players.

Moreover, the game itself actually offers these two definitions. By keeping to the rules and co-operating in an effective way, it is possible to be successful, reach higher levels and put one's name on the top of the high score list. At the same time, the clumsy anti-heroes Grag and Thog, who took on the mission by mistake, have little in common with the brave, purposeful warriors of, e.g., *Doom* or *Tomb Raider*. This humorous context works as an incentive for the players to take the game less seriously.

When I asked children about the reasons for devoting time to computer game playing, the main answer was, not unexpectedly, that it is fun. They said that it is fun to play, feels lovely to press the keys, and that the games are exciting and things happen all the time. They talked about being engrossed by the games and that they enjoy all the possibilities of choosing, changing and constructing that the games offer. Obviously, not only the mind, but also the whole body is being engaged. Children who play computer games jump up and down with eagerness or nervousness, they move rhythmically to the music and, as Henrik above, laugh, shout and scream, addressing the characters in the game. Even when the children in the interviews were far from the computer, just talking about the games, it was striking how physical their descriptions were. The emotions, the pictures and the sounds were recreated in the child's memory:

You put up a guy and then tell him like this: "Kill him." Then he takes up "woo" and then "fjipp" and then "zep", then it becomes-, then you just see the other one "bluuuu", and then he dies. (Max, 12 years).

In his study *Homo ludens* (1945), historian Johan Huizinga asserted that play has always been a fundamental part of human life. He pointed out that the main purpose of play is to create a zone apart from ordinary life in which it is possible to have esthetical experiences of "rapture" and "exaltation" (ibid). It is obvious that Henrik immediately entered this pleasurable world of make-believe, while Anders chose to focus on the goal – to defeat the enemies. He did not seem satisfied with Henrik's definition of the situation. The battle over interpretative prerogative can be observed in Anders' appeal to Henrik to take the other edge or in his criticizing Henrik for not taking the money. Anthropologist Eli Åm (1989) noticed, in her study of children's play, that play has a centre and a periphery. The borders of the play are set in the periphery; here the children negotiate about what to do, who is allowed to join the game, etc. In the centre, children let themselves enter what she, along with Frederik Buytendijk, calls "deep play" (ibid:100). In the periphery power conflicts exist, but in the centre hierarchies are set aside (ibid). In the example, it seems as if Henrik was able to step into a "deep play" of his own, while Anders still remained in the negotiating periphery.

Another way of expressing what is happening is to use the concepts of discourses and subject positions. Foucault talks about discourse as "an individualizable group of statements" (Foucault 1969/72:80). Sara Mills takes

this as her point of departure and defines discourses as “groupings of utterances or sentences, statements which are enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence” (Mills 1997:11). Discourses are “truths” that always compete with other discourses about being defined as the predominant, or preferably the only, truth. Every discourse indicates several positions, ways of behaving and presenting oneself, e.g., “good student”, “computer expert” or “play saboteur”. It is also possible to position each other and different positions contain different degrees of power. A subject position is an individual interpretation of a certain position

In the above example, we can see how Anders and Henrik used different discourses. Henrik took as his starting-point a play discourse, which helped him define the situation as mainly pure fun and put him in a position of joyful playing. Anders, on the other hand, turned to a competition discourse, which puts serious goal-orientedness before pleasure. Both of the boys tried – without success – to position each other in relation to the discourse they had chosen, Henrik by suggesting a fight between the two of them, Anders by criticizing Henrik’s irrational moves.

Changed Roles

One reason for choosing fun instead of competition as the main goal was the limited elbowroom. When manoeuvring the trolls on the platforms, the temptation to attack each other lay close at hand. In the next sequence, Henrik had got a new play partner, Erik. It was the first time Erik played *Bonkheads*:

Henrik: Now I’m going to kill you.

Erik: Not me.

Barbro: You’ve got it wrong, Henrik. It’s not him you should kill (laughs).

Henrik: Yes! I’m going to get you! Haha! I bounced on him.

Erik laughs spitefully and takes TNT.

Henrik: You blockhead! You can’t take it the first thing! Must I do everything, do you think?

Erik (laughs): Of course you must.

Henrik: But get lost! You shouldn’t... You make me... Are you looking for a fight? I don’t want to...

Erik laughs and disturbs Henrik’s troll.

Henrik: You silly cow!

Henrik: Here come the badgers. Now I’m going to be fair. Take some dynamite! Lovely, now we’ve got TNT. And don’t use it, mind you!

Erik fails to kill one of the enemies again and Henrik laughs and says that he is incompetent.

Erik wants to finish the game, but Henrik continues with the same enthusiasm. The first thing Erik does, then, is to click on TNT. Then he attacks Henrik's troll.

Henrik: No, stop it! Why must I die! Don't pick! You pick on me all the time. Erik laughs joyfully.

They continue for a while. Erik fails to make his troll jump. Instead he starts to sabotage even more, so that Henrik's troll dies. Then they leave the game and start a physical merry fighting.

In this passage, Henrik used the same discourse as in the previous quotation. He still defined the goal mainly as having fun. But his co-partner, Erik, did not, at all, have the serious attitude that Anders had. On the contrary, he showed little interest in continuing the game, probably because he, from the beginning, realized that Henrik was more skilled in playing *Bonkheads* than he was. But when Erik turned to mere jest and nonsense, Henrik had to find himself another position than the one he used when playing with Anders. Erik's anarchist way of playing, breaking every rule, threatened Henrik's ability to enjoy the game the way he wanted.

There are at least two possible interpretations of the boys' strategies. The first one is to comprehend the situation as an ongoing struggle between different discourses, where each of the boys fights for his own definition. Henrik's main goal seems to have been to get on with the game, to let himself be absorbed by it, while friendly teasing his fellow player. Erik appears to have teasing as his main project. In that case the end of the situation, when the boys left the game and openly began to fight, means a victory for Erik's definition, as he succeeded in positioning Henrik the way he wanted.

A second interpretation is that Erik tried to position himself within Henrik's discourse as a skilled player, but failed, and pulled Henrik down with him into his defeat.

Reflections of Media Violence

So far, the focus has been on the actual situation in front of the computer. But what about the actions in the game? Though *Bonkheads* is a rather harmless game with no blood and no brutal violence, and with pests returning to life if you do not kick them away, the message is the same as in innumerable other computer games and movies: Violence is interesting and exciting and a rational way to achieve a goal. What influence does all this violence have on children, on how they feel and how they behave?

Since the main purpose of my study was to explore children's own thoughts and interpretations, my way of finding the answers to this question started by simply asking them: "Are children affected by violent computer games?" I received many different answers to my question.

No (boy, 9).

I don't go around fighting just because I play such a game (girl, 12).

I don't think of killing, I think of winning (girl, 12).

In these types of answers, the children offered an alternative interpretation of their computer game playing to the adult interpretation, which mainly sees the actual violence performed in the game. The children said that play and reality are two quite different things, and that the focus of their enthusiasm is not on the possibility of acting out violence, but on reaching higher levels of the game and having fun.

When I asked the children about their feelings when playing, many of them talked about pleasure, pride, anger and disappointment. Pleasure and pride when they have an exciting and fun computer game and when everything works fine, anger and disappointment when they fail or the computer goes wrong. The frustration over troublesome computers could sometimes be very great. Kristian, 12, told about once being so angry when the computer did not work, that he threw a floppy-disc into the wall and when it did not break he became even angrier, went outside and shot the floppy-disc into pieces with his air-gun.

However, children never reported feeling sadness in front of the computer. Why is that? Sol, 12, said, in response to my question about children being affected by media violence:

But I believe that movies affect you more, because there it's a story. In a game, you should just: "finish him!" (sounds of karate kicking:) bscha, bscha, bscha!

Nola Alloway and Pam Gilbert, in their article "Video game culture: playing with masculinity, violence and pleasure", discuss two types of violence: symbolic and ritualistic. Symbolic violence invites reflexivity and involvement and places the violence in the social world. Ritualistic violence is superficial, predictable and pleasure-seeking. It is amoral, and poses no moral questions (Alloway & Gilbert 1998). The distinction between symbolic and ritualistic violence is the same as the one Sol made when differentiating movies and computer games. In computer games, the plot is rudimentary and there are no individual fortunes that can engage the feelings of the player. The focus lies on the very act that the player him-/herself performs. "All that matters is staying alive long enough to move between levels" (Fuller & Jenkins 1995:108).

Denial of the notion that computer games could be harmful is not the only standpoint, however. In response to my question of whether children are affected by media violence, many children gave answers such as the following:

Not girls, in that case, but boys, I think, actually (girl, 12).

If you are small, I think you could be affected (boy, 12).

Those who get a lot of beatings and who have mums and dads who are alcoholics or something like that (boy, 9).

"I" am not affected, but others are: those who are smaller, weaker, of the opposite sex or who have a bad social heritage. These are common ways of describing problems in our society and the children seem to have accepted these descriptions. David Buckingham (2000) observed that children reason in this way when talking about influences of advertising. They regarded themselves as "wise consumers" in contrast to younger children and ignorant adults (ibid:153). This is a way of taking a problem seriously and at the same time distancing oneself from it. Parents use the same method when they report not worrying much over their own children's tendencies towards violence, but instead show concern for those who are "weaker".

One predominant discourse tells us that media violence is harmful. This means that the phenomenon is not merely something adults claim, but that it is also a "truth" that children incorporate in their conception of the world. Within this discourse, children can find suitable positions for both themselves and others. Boys, small children and children with alcoholic parents are given positions in the risk zone, while the informants themselves occupy positions of rational and reflexive beings. Events from reality help to confirm and strengthen the discourse:

There were two six-year-old boys who kicked a four-year-old girl to death, because they had watched Power Rangers (Jennifer, 12).

There were two boys who had killed a boy. Kevin was the boy's name. It was in the newspaper. If you play terrible computer games every day, it looks fun, and then you go out and try it on someone (Rose, 9).

The girls were referring to two tragic cases in Scandinavia. In 1994, a Norwegian four-year-old girl named Silje was kicked by two boys and left in the snow to die. Swedish media made a connection between the incident and the tv-show Power Rangers, which contains considerable (ritualistic) violence (cf. Magnusson 1996). When a Swedish boy named Kevin was killed by his playmates in 1997, no official connections between media violence and the incident were made, but the connection was established in accordance with the predominant discourse and the Silje case functioned as a kind of interpretative model for Rose and other children.

However, it is inaccurate to say that children make a clear delineation implying that they are unaffected and other children are affected by media violence. I also received answers such as these:

When I played Duke Nukem I got bad dreams from it.

[Small children] do like this: "Let's play Duke Nukem. I'm Duke Nukem and you're The Black Widow. Then they come with the biggest stick and hit your head, just: "bam bam!" At least that's what I did when I was small.

I think everybody gets it [affected] a bit. Even if you don't think about it and don't know it yourself.

My study shows that the children had no problems in seeing the difference between play – make-believe – and reality. They knew that films and computer games are fictitious stories, and they were familiar with the codes of the play and capable of making the distinction between a real fight and a playful fight. Other researchers have come to the same conclusion (cf. Hangard Rasmussen 1993, Mouritsen 1996, Rönneberg 1997). The problem, as I see it, is for the children to maintain the border between play and seriousness in their activities. Several boys told about violent play in which media characters served as models – play that degenerated into real violence when a kick, meant for fun, hit too hard. One might begin playing a computer game because it is fun, but with increased involvement, the game can become so exciting and terrible that discomfort predominates.

Something that must be considered is that, today, the adult world is much more involved in children's play than it has been earlier, and that this involvement might have implications. One expression of this greater involvement is the ongoing public discussion about media violence and its effects on children, which makes the discourse on the connection between media violence and real violence so compelling. Children's play is watched and interpreted by adults and also by the children themselves. A child in front of a violent computer game "knows" s/he is playing a game that might be harmful to children.

Another expression of the adult world's increased involvement in children's play is that adults to a great degree provide children with play material and that toys are very realistic and have explicit play instructions. For example, plastic figures like Action Man are constructed to grip a gun, but cannot caress, and it is difficult to use Action Man and Barbie in the same game, as they are different in size. It is not always easy to construct images and stories other than those provided by the toy or the computer game.

Sol 12: It's fun to go around killing then, but.../.../ Kill them and see the blood gushing, that's rather sick really. /.../ The music is so horrid. /.../ You could sit and hum on "Imse vimse spider", or something, but...

Håkan 9: But I'm not most afraid of those nasty guys, but mostly of myself. Though I know I'll never try something like this.

Barbro: How do you mean? Afraid of yourself?

Håkan: Well, you become rather-. It feels mostly frightening to be in a computer game and to feel you're the guy running around shooting people. /.../

I feel in a way as a murderer myself. But of course I do know that it's just a computer game.

Apparently both Sol and Håkan had a reason for reminding me – and themselves – that those horrible games are just games and not reality. The boundaries between play and reality seem to have been blurred. In at least Sol's case, it could be that the interview situation itself brought to the fore problems that were not present when Sol played *Doom* or *Street Fighter* by herself. When an adult talks to children about violence and killing, ethical discourses are present, no matter what intentions the adult might have for the discussion. Furthermore, Sol's classmate Helena, who also joined the interview, claimed it was meaningless and "quite stupid" to play violent computer games. This caused Sol to take on a reflexive attitude, modulating her interest for those games and bringing the ethical dilemma to the fore. But she also mentioned strategies – humming on a children's song – for managing to play violent computer games without becoming too absorbed in them. This could indicate that upholding the borders between play and reality is a problem that she had experienced before.

Håkan, who was a verbal and reflexive boy, seemed to have thought about this problem before; he could report unpleasant experiences of feeling like a murderer, to that extent that he became afraid of himself. He described the dilemma of letting himself go in the realms of an exciting game, on the one hand, and of being so absorbed that he experienced unknown and frightening depths within himself, on the other.

In the discussion about children's competence as consumers of artefacts, media and computer games, one must not ignore the fact that all these consumer goods are provided by a market, whose major goal is to earn money and not to give children a good childhood. Brian Sutton-Smith (1986), who has studied toys as cultural expressions, asserts that it is not the single toy that affects children, but the commercial lifestyle that the toys represents, a lifestyle that can be seen in the routines, expectations and values surrounding purchases and use of toys. In the same way, violent computer games are part of a specific context of society. A society where violence is presented as interesting and worth noticing, a society where children are regarded as consumers, but less often as producers, where different screen activities are self-evident parts of daily life, a society that regulates its own violence and that of its individuals in specific ways, e.g., by not inflicting the death penalty and by forbidding corporal punishment in schools and in the home. Apparently, children are competent, but that does not mean that childhood entails harmony and well-being. You could be a competent street-child or victim of bullying. Being culturally competent only implies the ability to successfully handle specific situations within a given societal context.

Ethics in the Game – Ethics in Reality

We will now return to the children in front of the computer to find out something about what attitudes they displayed in relation to ethical matters in actual situations. Two kinds of phenomena appeared when Anders, Henrik and Erik played *Bonkheads*: their successes and failures in the game and the interaction among the boys. Happy exclamations and cries of disappointment accompanied the process of the battle, but even more present was the ongoing battle between the “co”-players, competing over space and interpretative prerogative. The very actions of killing dogs, spiders and racoons, however, were not the subject of expressions of values of any kind. These actions were unquestioned, taken-for-granted parts of the game. To question these assumptions would be to hazard the possibility of playing the game. If you want to enjoy the fun of this platform game, it is simply necessary to accept its conditions and its morals. It would be irrational to start questioning the morality of the game in the play situation. Still, generally speaking, ethical questions are often present in children’s computer game playing.

Christian, Ebba and Rose were three 8-year-olds from the same class. We were at Christian’s house, sitting in front of his computer with the action game *Outlaws*. *Outlaws* is a “Doom-clone”, where you “walk around” in an environment seeing through the play character’s (a sheriff) eyes. You can only see the play character’s hands and the weapon he holds. His mission is to hunt criminals and defeat them, most commonly by killing them. The girls had never played this game before and they were not very used to computers. It apparently pleased Christian to sit and play his favourite game while the three of us watched him.

Christian: There is one more. He runs by and thinks he’s tough.

Rose: He’s not the least tough.

Christian: Don’t make yourself tough! I’m kind of best here. You’re just the ones who think you’re tough. O o o oh! Ouch!

Ebba (irritated): Hallo, what’s all this about??

Christian: I don’t know. Do you think I know everything?

[Rose giggles.]

Christian: I just shoot and shoot.

Ebba: Haven’t you ever played this game before?

Christian: Yes, I have.

Ebba: But what’s it all about then?

Christian: What do you think?

Ebba (in a biting tone): What’s happening? Are you just going to shoot a lot of people all the time?

Christian: Yes, that’s just what you’re supposed to do.

Rose: Are there just more and more coming?

Christian: No. No, but when you’ve killed all, you start all over again.

[The girl giggles.]

Christian: And then you've got to do like this all the time, walk round and shoot, but it, it – You should handle the computer and understand what you're doing and such things.

Christian saw this as a play activity. It is the usual “cowboy play” in the shape of a computer game, and he strengthened the play feeling by also acting verbally. He addressed the villains, stressed his own strength and toughness and shouted “ouch” when the play character was hit. Sometimes he was also an actor in a performance with three spectators, which added another dimension to his game.

But suddenly the play was interrupted; Ebba took a step backwards, out of the play situation and questioned what it was all about. When she introduced reality into the play, she was acting as what Huizinga (1945) calls a “play destroyer”, the greatest threat to every play situation. Having moved beyond the domain and concept of the play, leaving the enjoyment and engrossment of the world of imagination, the whole thing directly fell altogether flat. All you do is “shoot a lot of people all the time”. Christian observed this. He was forced to look upon the game in the same way as Ebba did and to admit that it was only about shooting villains and then starting all over again.

First he used a defensive strategy, saying that he did not know. He probably did not want to act as defender of the game, or perhaps he suspected that he did not have any answers that Ebba would accept. But then he found a reliable argument: you learn something! “You should handle the computer and understand what you're doing”. Now he is on safe ground, allied with one of the predominant childhood discourses of Western society, using the same argument that adults do when they recommend computers for small children.

The above quotation shows the importance of the play being based on mutual agreement. When Ebba stepped out of the play and questioned it, there was nothing left of the imagination and fun. It also shows how children move between different understandings and that they reflect over these moves. They change between a play perspective and the perspective of ordinary life, and they accept the consequences of the choices they make.

But as an adult viewer, I noticed that I made another interpretation. I felt a slight unease sitting and watching this eight-year-old boy, shooting people consecutively. When Ebba showed a critical attitude, I was pleased, as I understood it as her taking a moral stand against shooting people. Afterwards, however, I can see that it was not at all a question of a universal morality, but about the morals of the play. The morals of the play state that everybody should be engaged on the same terms, and that everybody should have fun in the play (e.g., Åm 1993, Corsaro 1985). Here, Christian sat in front of the computer all the time and the girls had passive roles, which they were not content with. The play situation was not satisfying for all the members, Ebba and Rose did not have as much fun as Christian did. Ebba objected to this by questioning the premise of the game.

Somewhat later it became evident that Ebba had made no standpoint against violence in general. In spite of the girls' protests, Christian continued to play and when the play character died, he wanted to start from the beginning.

Ebba: Oh! Are you starting *again*?!

Christian: This is a good game, you see.

Ebba: No, it's *not* good!

Christian: All the others are just boring games, you can't do anything with them.

Ebba: (sighs). But it's not fun.

Christian: Now I'm just going to shoot a hen for dinner. I want dinner!

Rose: It just jumps away there!

Christian: Hallo!

Ebba: Shoot them all! Shoot, shoot two!

Christian: Two?

Ebba: Yes.

Christian: One's enough.

Ebba: No, two's enough, then you have for two days.

Barbro (pitying): Oh! Feathers everywhere!

Ebba: But they are just annoying. Take one more.

Christian: Mm, they are just annoying. At last you agree... Aaaa!

Another hen dies.

Ebba: One more! Shoot them all!

Christian was keen on playing his game, but he also wanted the girls to get involved in his playing. It made it more fun, and when the game became a common project, he could continue to play longer. I interpreted his dramatic exclamations and his narrative descriptions as an attempt to involve the girls in the actions of the game. And he did succeed. In the beginning of the game, it is possible to shoot hens and Christian made up a story about shooting a hen for dinner. It is not possible to cook or eat the hens in the game, but that did not matter. The important thing was to create an attractive story around what is happening on the screen. Ebba accepted the invitation and became very engrossed. Christian's play suggestion sparked her imagination and she gave herself wholeheartedly to the activities. I considered her rather blood-thirsty; a long time after the quoted sequence, she urged Christian to kill all the hens. This helped me understand that my former supposition, about Ebba taking a moral stance against killing, was wrong. When I tried to arouse sympathy for the hens, she just brushed it aside, declaring that they are "annoying". She obviously had taken sides with the play, i.e., with Christian's view. Christian noted this with satisfaction and could continue his dramatic hunt.

Concluding Comments

Violence in the context of children's computer game playing has several different aspects. The actions of fighting and killing in the scenery of the game could be of subordinate importance in relation to the joy and excitement of the playing itself. When several children play together, the actions of the game and the context of playing together could inspire rivalry and playful battles between the co-players. Here the children used discourses of play and competition to find suitable positions for themselves and one another.

In an interview the context is quite different. This situation, which involves an adult posing questions and one or two children answering, invites the individuals to assume positions of distance and reflection, and when the questions deal with violence and ethics, specific culturally agreed upon discourses are brought to the fore. In this context, children turn to explanations and information that they have obtained from, e.g., media, parents, teachers or friends, and interpret these views in relation to their own experiences and knowledge. As cultural beings, children find solutions, explanations and strategies that stand out as rational and that offer attractive positions for themselves.

A third possible attitude involves making moral judgements during the play or the computer game session. This could be accomplished by negotiating the rules and frames of the play, by criticizing someone else's moves, or by questioning the very act of violence and death carried out in the game. As we have seen, that kind of protest could in its turn be a disguised critique of the morals, not of the computer game, but of the play.

Trying to meet children on their own terms and create an understanding of their points of view helps us to obtain knowledge of children's ways of using play and games. This implies accepting the fact that children can joyfully and wholeheartedly play a horrible computer game, without necessarily having psychological problems or a future as criminals. But an equally important task is to elucidate the frames of children's activities, strategies and interpretations. Children belong to a specific society, where specific discourses about violence are predominant and where children are offered specific positions. Though children are competent subjects, who in many ways help to shape societal development, adults have the main responsibility for the space in which children can exercise their competence, because adults not only have the economical and political power, but also the power to define and interpret.

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Chapter 8

Making Sense of Screen-based Media

The Uses and Readings of Television, Computer Games, and Internet among Swedish Young People

Ulrika Sjöberg

OUR terms of reference in this inquiry were to study the impact of television on children and young people. In 1954, when the study was officially planned, as many as 3,000,000 homes had television sets. It was known that, compared with radio listening, children viewed more and began viewing at an earlier age. The possible effects of this situation, while the subject of much public speculation, had not been systematically investigated (Himmelweit, Oppenheim & Vince, 1958, p. 1).

With these words, Hilde Himmelweit et al.'s classical work from the 1950s on the place of television in the lives of British children was introduced. Since this study was conducted, we have seen several changes in many aspects of children's lives, e.g., changes in the surrounding media environment, increasing consumption participation, and the 'technicization' of leisure. While it was the TV set that entered the homes 50 years ago, since the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, electronic media (such as cable and satellite television, video and video games) have become a common feature in most households in modern societies, and a wide range of digital technologies and media are at present entering the media arena. Computer games, CD-ROM technology, digital TV, the Internet and the latest development within virtual reality – where the user wears a computer interface, usually a helmet – are all such examples. Not only are we facing digital media, but several changes of a more structural nature have also taken place in the social landscape. Today, various media are involved in all aspects of everyday life, and it therefore becomes meaningless to compare, for instance, those with and without television. It is rather a matter of finding patterns in young people's use of the media, and discovering how these patterns are related to access, background, opportunities, and interests. One talks about the 'technicization of leisure' and the 'generation gap', which indicates that young people are involved with sophisticated electronic and digital media, and that they are gaining more knowledge about the functions of media than their parents, teachers, and other elders have. Children are also, to a greater extent than

before, becoming independent consumers; with their weekly allowance, they make their own explorations, choices, and uses of available products (Livingstone & Gaskell 1995).

This chapter aims to put the reception of media content, the interaction between text and receiver, into a wider context by drawing special attention to how the screen-based media, television and computers (with regard to computer games and the Internet), are used in daily life and to the meaning-making practices discernible in the readings of these media. Besides the focus on content, an additional aim is to explore how various media uses and the meanings attached to media, their content and use, are an outcome of a constant mutual interplay between the individual, his or her private settings, experiences, attitudes, and the wider culture and society. Throughout the chapter, the embeddedness of media in children's and adolescents' daily lives becomes evident. In attempting to describe how these are closely intertwined, it is necessary to acknowledge the multiple ways in which young people encounter and appropriate media in different contexts. And this insight is best given by the children themselves. Thus, the use of media is a situated activity (including different types of access and skills) in daily life; it is an integral part of daily routines, of their spatial and temporal flows. These encounters with media are also reflected upon by the individual and elaborated in these contexts and flows.

It is important to stress and keep in mind the varied experiences of being young in contemporary society, but also the array of various media offered on today's media landscape. As regards the media landscape, it is important, especially considering the present trend of media convergence, not to treat a medium as something homogeneous, but instead to consider its multiform in terms of content and services. The parallel trend of divergence (the increase in media supply) also makes it increasingly crucial to refer to other media even if the main focus of a particular study is just on one medium (cf. Jensen, 1998; Sjöberg, 2002). Present changes on the media scene in terms of media convergence, the feature of interactivity, the blur between genres in media content, and the increasing amount of transnational media have created new challenges for those wishing to understand and conceptualize media users, in a situation where new modes of audiencing are being put forward. Without neglecting the fact that people's media patterns are not totally modified as new media developments are assimilated into previous media experiences and behaviour, becoming part of an already existing media repertoire, digital media offer new possibilities for users in terms of content, production, and forms of communication.

The Fabric of Daily Life

How a medium changes its position, both spatially and temporally, in the household, is often described in terms of the process of domestication and

the process of naturalization (cf. Reimer, 1993; Silverstone, 1994). That various media differ in the degree to which they have accomplished this process has several consequences for their role in structuring users' daily routines and for how intertwined people's media use is with other day-to-day activities. Of the three media of interest, television has completed this process while computer games and the Internet have just started their domestic 'journey'. In comparison to television, which is watched almost every day, the young respondents who participated in the survey played computer games about 3 days a week and logged on to the Internet about once a week. The time spent on these three media also differed. As concerns television, 2 hours were on average spent on it, while the figures for computer games and the Internet were 50 minutes and 18 minutes, respectively. The home is a dynamic sphere, and as additional media are put in use by its family members, these media are permeated by existing media structure and habits, and as the process proceeds, the role and use of traditional media may be modified. This is, of course, not only a matter of media finding their position within the household, but also of media *per se* and their logic, that is, of a specific medium's special features, which in turn affect its use and role in everyday life. For example, even if the Internet shares with other media, such as telephone, radio, and television, the ability to decrease space and time, people are increasingly able to participate simultaneously in discussions and conversations, and interact socially regardless of where they are located for the moment and at the time of communication.

The multiple television sets and other media apparatuses in the household are frequently discussed in terms of increasing individualized access and use. As for *access*, the analysis shows several differences in age, gender, and S.E.S. of family. In terms of media access in the households, respondents from a high S.E.S. family are more likely to have cable/satellite television, teletext, computer, and Internet at home. This social stratification of media access seems to be of less importance when looking at personal ownership, with the exception of video and video games, where the figure for the respondents belonging to a low S.E.S. group is higher. It is without question the boys who have the most screen/IT-oriented bedrooms, and as the child grows older, his or her room becomes increasingly equipped with diverse media. The role of these media in the creation of young people's bedroom culture as a central place for formation of identities and social relationships is worth exploring further, where at least in terms of media access differences are found for gender and age.

The social arrangements of young people's media use show that it may be both a social and solitary event, thus individualized access does not automatically imply individual use. In comparison to computer games and the Internet, television is to a much greater extent a *family medium*, where the social value of watching with other family members is appreciated. It can rather be said that having access to several TV sets and computers in the household gives the individual greater opportunity to choose whether to

utilize a given medium alone. While the social context of exposure may be preferred on some occasions, the preference for a specific programme or computer game, or avoidance of any disturbance, may lead to solitary use.

In comparison to television, computer games are played to a much lesser extent with one's mother or father, and are more likely to be a *peer medium*, especially for the boys. Besides one's friends, games are also played to a lesser extent with one's brother or sister. While both boys and girls in the study may have talked about television programmes with friends or family, it is especially the boys who talked about computer games, both before and after playing. It is also boys who bought and swapped games with friends, and who visited Internet cafés. Hence, for the boys, the central role of computer games in their daily life is especially seen in the social context of the peer group and, therefore, additional meanings are expected in association with computer game use.

Even if the Internet may be utilized together with friends when searching for information for a school assignment and chatting, or utilized with the family when looking for websites containing shared interests, this was not as frequently mentioned as were television and computer games, and can therefore be said to be a rather *individual medium*. It is an individual medium when looking at whether it is used with physically present others, whereas it may be a rather social medium when, for instance, the user talks to other persons on a chat line. In addition, even if the Internet may serve as a topic of conversation, less relevance seems to be attached to this type of use in comparison to television. One of the explanations for this difference in degree of integration and importance in structuring daily routines is the varied amount of time young people devote to television, computer games, and Internet. Another reason may be the changeable content of the latter and being able to utilize the net at different times, which can be compared to television programmes where the same content is broadcasted during specific regular hours. It will be of interest to see whether changes occur as the computer and the Internet become increasingly familiar in children's leisure time, and of course the development of new content and services, both for television and the Internet, will also play a role.

When looking at the role of television, computer games, and the Internet in daily life by discussing with whom these media are mainly utilized, too much emphasis on "free choice" – whether to use a medium alone or not, when to use it, and for what – can be misleading, as the *social availability* of a medium in the household is not to be forgotten. In the study, young people's use of television, computer games, and Internet was, to varying degrees, regulated by parents in terms of content and the time spent, and the "competing" use of other family members. Even if conflicts may arise when several family members want to watch different programmes on television, having more than one TV set and video in the household makes it easier. In comparison, limited access to the computer may lead to disputes with others in the family. The computer is also a far more gendered tech-

nology, as it is frequently controlled by the brother, both spatially and temporally, which in turn means that girls face more obstacles in using the computer (cf. McNamee, 1998, 1999).

That the content of games does not seem to be regulated to the same degree as television may result from parents' relative lack of experience with games. In addition to the shared content of the former, television is also more likely to be viewed together with one's parents. When discussing parents' restrictions on Internet use, the temporal aspect once again becomes evident, in that some youngsters are only allowed to utilize the net after six o'clock when the rate is lower. This specific type of restriction concerning access is only seen for the Internet and has, of course, implications for how much the net is utilized and when, which is important to keep in mind. While there are also some parents who tell their son or daughter not to give their telephone number or address to strangers when chatting, many of the interviewees talked about their parents' lack of knowledge about and insight into what they do on the Internet, especially when chatting. In comparison to other media, the Internet gives young people greater possibilities to create its content by their own means and preferences. The emergence of so-called communities on the net, where one has to be a member, is one example of an additional mediated sphere for young people. Their use, the meanings attached to these websites, and their role in day-to-day activities need to be explored further and illustrate how media, besides taking place in various contexts, also create these contexts, which exemplifies the process of contextualization (cf. Rasmussen, 1999).

Besides the question of with whom one uses television, computer games, and Internet, and of their embeddedness in the social context of the household, in terms of rules and conflicts, the media's role as a topic of everyday conversation among its users was often mentioned (cf. Silverstone, 1990, 1994; Gillespie, 1995). One media use appreciated among the young people in the study is to visit websites of television programmes in order to get updated information, to look at pictures and to chat with participants, actors, or viewers of a programme. Similar use can be seen for the websites of different favourite musicians. This clearly exemplifies *new forms of communicative relationship and contexts of reception*, not only between young people and media content, but also to other audience members. With respect to the latter, it indicates a shift away from the concept of mass audience, where its members are seen as rather unknown to each other and as independent actors (cf. Webster & Phalen, 1997). In the citation below, a 15/16-year-old girl described how the Internet, with its websites on horses, gives her a chance to chat with other people with the same interest:

- You can look a little on the Internet, there are special websites (...).
What kind of websites are those?
- There is a website where you can chat with others interested in horses and such.

What does this website contain?

– You sit and discuss different questions about horses and then you can buy things that have to do with horses, buy horses and such, and then there is, what more can you do, you can find more websites that you can look at that have to do with horses.

While TV, radio, and books are characterized by their mediated quasi-interaction, being non-reciprocal in character, as can be seen in the specific use of chat above, computer-mediated communication facilitates a two-way flow of utterances between, for instance, viewers of a particular TV programme (cf. Thompson, 1995). This dialogue is, in comparison to similar types of discussions in the sofa in front of the TV set or the next day at school or work, not anchored in spatial proximity. We have seen how television content intersects with the daily activities of its viewers, and how it is interpreted in this particular context. However, with the help of Internet, it has now become much easier to chat with other viewers or fans of a music group irrespective of locality, where common interests or preferences establish the basis for this form of communication. While chat lines lack the clues of face-to-face interaction, it is of great interest to see how the developments and use of the webcam and pictures while chatting may alter the conditions for mediated communication. Other questions to be raised are the kind of influences this combined use, for example television and Internet, and its discursive space will have on the interpretation of its content and on the (re)organization of social relations and daily routines among young people. One example of this is how the ability to chat with other users of a certain website may alter the media's central role as a topic of conversation with family members and friends. Will different types of rhetorical activities develop, where communication with absent others is brought to the fore? To what extent is this new form of engagement and experience modifying existing daily talks about media content among media users?

As can be seen, television, computer games, and the Internet are in several and different ways embedded in everyday life. Not only are there differences in terms of the time devoted to these media, personal access, with whom they are utilized, how their use is mediated in terms of rules and conflicts, but there are also differences in the degree to which their content serves as a topic of conversation. In addition, varied perceptions, preferences, and meanings are associated with these media, a topic to which our attention will be drawn next.

The Ecology of Media

In the beginning of the chapter, it was stated that, in the age of media convergence, it is becoming increasingly difficult to study a medium in isola-

tion without some sort of consideration of the wider media environment. It is also by letting young people compare media with each other that a better understanding of a particular medium can be gained. The popularity of television is not merely seen in the great amount of time spent on it compared to other media. Besides its wide range of content, several other positive values are attached to the TV set, such as being able to watch while in the company of friends or family and providing company when one is home alone. It is also the medium that is used as background noise, as electronic wallpaper, a situation in which little attention is devoted to the content.

The notion that young people growing up in a digital media environment are totally absorbed by its interactive features does not provide us with a complete picture. In fact, television is appreciated because it gives them the opportunity to be “passive”; they can just be entertained, either in front of the screen or when a programme is background noise. This statement may come as a surprise to those who automatically associate today’s young people with an almost innate desire for interactive media. As we know, traditional television is slowly being modified as a response to the changing media environment, and examples of this trend are the use of Internet by TV programmes and the recent development of digital TV. It is of great interest to see how viewers will respond to this development, considering the positive value associated with television due to its “passivity”.

In a digital media age characterized by interactivity, the future of the traditional media is debated among researchers, politicians, and the industry. That everything will be wired seems unlikely if one listens to young people talk about their media use. In fact listening to young people shows that, besides the present development of media convergence, media supply and use are characterized by divergence, as the individual is surrounded by a broad spectrum of different media of which he or she makes use. Thus, the notion that media innovations will immediately displace older media use is not supported by the young respondents and interviewees. In fact, media developments are more likely to be a question of additive and specialized use of media (cf. Johnsson-Smaragdi, 2001). This can partly be explained by what Adoni (1985) called functional differentiation, where emerging media types serve other functions or take over only some of the functions offered by other media. This was already seen in the previous section about the fabric of daily life, where television, computer games, and the Internet seem to differ in the degree to which each is a shared medium, both in terms of their social arrangements and as a topic of conversation among family members and peers.

Another example that seems to support the notion of *media accumulation* is these young people’s habits of reading a book before going to sleep, reading the newspaper while eating breakfast, and so forth. In addition, the wide range of media encountered by young people are evaluated and appreciated for their different content, which may encourage the use or avoidance of a particular medium, or cause the individual to seek out other alter-

natives. For example, books and the Internet are perceived as a good combination when doing schoolwork, where the latter provides updated information. Books are not immediately displaced as they contain material that is easier to find and are much more likely to be in Swedish than are Internet websites. The feature of interactivity is brought to the fore in young people's use of the Internet (especially its chat lines) and computer games. The latter is positively evaluated by its players, as one can choose between various alternatives while playing, and the Internet is unique with its chat lines, something not even computer games or television can compete with. Related to the social context of use and its specific content are an individual's specific expectations and experiences of a medium. Additive media use is the outcome of choices made in relation to (in addition to the social context) the psychological state of the user, such as his/her being bored, sad, or wanting to relax, and thereby serves various purposes.

Hence, a tendency of media accumulation is discernible, where the reasons for utilizing a particular medium are related to several factors, such as preferred content, its social context of exposure, and/or the emotional state or experiences of a person. When asked what they would use if they had to choose between watching television and playing computer games, a group of 12/13-year-old boys answered that "it depends":

If you could choose, you had a TV in front of you and a computer for playing a game, what would you choose?

- It depends.
 - It depends on what game it is or what film it is on TV or so. If it's a good film that you want to watch then...
 -then you watch it...
 - ...but if there is nothing on TV then you have the computer.
 - It can sometimes be nice not having to participate because it is very much in computer games, you yourself make all the action but with TV you just sit, you're not doing very much. It can be nice as relaxation or yeah.
- What would you choose?

– Watching TV!

Why would you choose the TV?

- Because, but it depends what programme it is.
 - If it is a bad film then you take the computer, good film then you don't care about the computer.
 - It depends. If you've got a new game then the computer does not always come last then...
 - ...then I usually sit and sit.
- (12/13-year-old boys)

In relation to previous discussions on how young people tend to take advantage of the wide range of media offered to them, a selective use of content within a specific medium is discernible. Looking more specifically at

the content encountered by young respondents in their use of television, computer games, and Internet, it is the *gendered preferences* that are most evident, showing how media use is a complex social and cultural product (cf. Lemish, Liebes & Seidmann, 2001). As for television, especially girls have soaps and series as their favourite genres, while boys prefer watching science fiction, comedy, and sport (cf. Garitaonandia, Juaristi & Oleaga, 2001). While these different tastes concern one's favourite programme, which one does not like to miss, the analysis also reveals that this is not the same as not watching the genres in question. As concerns soaps, both boys and girls attach the same associations to the genre – soaps are valued for the insight they provide into daily events and relations.

The central role of gender in preferences for a special type of content is also seen, though to a much greater extent, for computer games (cf. Johansson, 2000; Garitaonandia et al., 2001; Jessen, 2001). While girls prefer adventure and pedagogical games, action and car/aircraft games top the boys' list. After the interview in the in-depth study on computer games, the interviewees were also asked to draw an imaginative game, and once again the gender differences described above are discernible. It is especially the younger boys who enjoy violent action games with the aim of killing enemies. The interviewed girls, on the other hand, drew games that do not contain any shooting or killing, but rather involve collecting fruit and keys or avoiding harmful obstacles. In addition, when drawing a game and explaining it, boys and girls show different styles of playing or narrative styles. While the narrative conventions of girls seem to be circular, not paying too much attention to the final endpoint of the game but rather appreciating the special events encountered when playing, the opposite is seen for the boys, who emphasized the importance of knowing the endpoint and the means for reaching it. Thus, in comparison to the boys, the girls drew (and explained) the whole game, or at least one of the levels, from the beginning to the end. The boys, on the other hand, drew (and explained) a specific situation, without relating it to a wider context. Figure 1 shows a drawing made by an 8-year-old boy, where a player walks in an infected city and the enemy are lethal bacteria. The player's assignment is to recreate life and kill all zombies. The game is drawn with a pencil, but the zombie has a green colour and red blood spurts from the hurt monster and the injured soldier. It is, in other words, the action *per se* that is of importance in the drawing.

That playing, and the readings of the content, is affected by socially constructed traditional gender roles is discernible in young people's discussions about why boys and girls prefer different types of games, and exemplifies how media, and media use, are varyingly culturally available. According to the girls, not only are games on the market designed to first and foremost appeal to boys with their emphasis on violence and weapons, but they also explain gender differences in preference based on traditional gender schema. The latter was discussed by both boys and girls, and they showed full awareness of what is expected of them; playing an action game may give a girl

Figure 1. An action game (war) (8-year-old boy)

the label of being boyish, while a boy playing a girlish game is perceived as a geek. Both boys and girls have firm opinions on what the opposite sex prefers and this affects their use of and attitudes towards computer games. Hence, besides the inscribed gender roles in many computer games, the preference for a particular type of game is influenced by prevailing gender roles in the society. This clearly shows that a medium, its use, and the meanings attached to it, must be understood as a social process rather than an autonomous product and event.

As for the functions utilized on the Internet, differences in age become more evident in comparison to television and computer games. With increasing age, the child uses a wider range of utilities on the net, while the younger ones become familiar with the net by surfing. This age difference is not surprising, as the child gains increased knowledge about how to use Internet and its diverse content with age. In addition, as many texts are in English, access to this material is rather limited for the younger children. Given its multifunctional content, there is nothing one cannot find on the net. However, while some older children utilize a wide range of facilities on the net, a more selective use is discernible among the younger children, who mainly use it for a single purpose: to surf, to search for information, to download material, or to send e-mail.

Mediated Experiences

Through the media, young people extend their lived experiences of immediate events with mediated ones (cf. Giddens, 1991; Thompson, 1995). Their range and types of experience have increased and become increasingly complex, forming a rather circular pattern of interdependence. Not only are the media bringing familiar and unfamiliar events into daily life – events that are appropriated and interpreted in the local setting of the user – these are in turn reordering and affecting the user's personal experiences of daily events.

The analyses show the importance of media researchers moving beyond classifications such as entertainment and information. Among the young Internet users are those who not only search for information on the websites when working on a school assignment, but who also take advantage of its chat lines, posing questions to other people who, for example, live in the country about which they are writing. This intersection of *entertainment and information* is also seen for computer games (especially for girls). Knowledge gained from games like Back Pack are linked to their daily life; this knowledge includes what it is like to travel, what to do when being robbed or what it is like to apply for jobs. With the popularity of genres such as soaps, series, sci-fi, and comedy, the entertainment value of television is obvious. That this should merely imply a rather superficial relation to its content neglects the special use of, for instance, soaps by young viewers in their daily life. The genre serves as a source of information and experience in young people's attempts to widen their understanding of matters concerning themselves, such as relationships and family problems, and to learn how to handle different situations they face on a day-to-day basis. Hence, the genre gives the young people an *insight into the adult world*, where the private and public spheres of everyday life become blurred (cf. Meyrowitz, 1985). This use of soaps and computer games exemplifies what Ziehe (1984, 1986, 1989) called 'cultural expropriation', stating that a wide range of mediated experiences are becoming a source of experiences, which in turn leads to an increasing reflexivity about oneself and ones surroundings in contemporary society. Even if these mediated experiences may, according to Ziehe, constrain attempts to have one's own experiences, they also serve as a common setting for discussing different areas of life. However, as concerns the role of soaps for young people, it is evident that it is not a matter of mediated experiences replacing personal ones, but rather of the two being closely integrated with each other, where the meanings derived from the soaps are closely related to the young viewer's contextual circumstances.

Are *Tre Kronor*, *Vänner* och *Fiender* realistic, can it happen in reality?

- Yes, of course! [From all the interviewees]
- Not so much at once.
- Everything in the series is real
- Yes.

Do you all agree on this?

– Yes.

–How people live.

– The city is true, it exists in reality, perhaps not all in Mälardalen but it exists.

– And the problems and so.

– In those series like *Vänner och Fiender* and *Tre Kronor* everything happens simultaneously, so much at the same time, it is quite unreal.

Can one learn anything from these series?

– Yes.

– How adults behave.

Is this good to know?

– But there are also children in the series.

Is it important to know how adults behave?

– In many films they show that teenagers are in love with each other, they do not have any job and they get married and have children and life then becomes difficult. You learn from this so you don't get married, fall in love and rush into marriage when you don't have any job, nothing, how can you then earn a living? So you learn a lot.

– But you, you also learn how you could be when you get older, perhaps they start taking drugs because of peer pressure, so maybe you should keep away from that, thinking "I will never start taking drugs or start smoking".

(12/13-year-old boys)

Another example of the social embeddedness of the meaning-making practices involved in young people's readings of media is seen with regard to the Internet. In this chapter, special attention is given to how the Internet, with its various chat lines, serves as an *additional arena* for experimenting with and trying out different presentations of one's self. The emphasis is on *additional*, as we have always, through various social roles, choice of clothes, and hairstyle, etc., tried to say something about ourselves to others. In contrast to a postmodern perspective, in which expressions such as multiple identities in multiple worlds are frequently found, the focus should instead be on the continuities with more traditional forms of presentation, mediated as well as non-mediated (cf. Turkle, 1995). However, people are today given an alternative means for this, where the user does not have to reveal his or her identity. The Internet is, with its features of fragmentation of ideas and institutions, a phenomenon of late modernity and may become a useful tool in a person's attempt to explore and express the increasing reflexivity of the self in contemporary society (cf. Giddens, 1991). This reflexivity is also encouraged by the net, as it is a medium with global reach where, for example, the existence of different sources of information, perspectives, and opinions become apparent for users.

That young people's experiences on the net cannot be seen in isolation from their life off-line is made especially evident by the fact that even if the Internet provides the means for global communication, the interviewed young

people prefer to chat with people who live nearby so that they can talk about local events and experiences. That the meanings associated with chat are socially constructed is discernible among those interviewed girls who presented themselves as perfect, usually referring to physical appearance, which is influenced by the ideals of contemporary Western society. They also reported using the chat lines as a means to fulfil their dreams or playing with the idea of how things will be when they are adults, as stated by one 12/13-year-old girl:

Can you tell me a little bit more about how you describe yourself, you say that you are sixteen, and that you live in Stockholm...

– Yes, or that I'm studying to become a vet or I lie about everything, or that I (...) I like France, my aunt lives in France, so perhaps I say that I have lived in Paris for three years and like I take my dreams, then I pretend that I am that, the way I would like to be. But if you think about before, when you could not chat, could you do this, lie or make up things, somewhere else?

– No, because then you can always be revealed but then on the Internet you cannot really be revealed.

An interesting finding concerns how persons with whom young people chat on the net are perceived and the type of meanings attached to this mediated interaction. Due to its anonymous features and the possibility to lie, the Internet sets the rules of conduct and is taken advantage of by its young users. This has consequences not only for how they present themselves while chatting, but also in that these absent others are not perceived as ordinary friends; the aim is seldom to form a long lasting friendship. A 12/13-year-old boy said the following:

(...) has it happened that you have made an appointment with someone?

– Sure. If they live in Malmö then you say you should meet, then you've like said the Catholic church down here [next to the apartment].

So you meet so close to where you live?

– Yes, sometimes. It is quite funny 'cause you can see them, some of them go there and you can like sit and watch them and things like that.

So you never go down?

– No, hell no, child abusers and such.

In this context, two central interrelated aspects are worth reflecting upon – the process of commodification and moral meaning/action. Living in a consumer culture, the *commodification* of objects and services permeates our daily life. With respect to technology, it has until recently been conceived as any ordinary tool, but with the advent of the Internet (in this case its chat lines) subjects are becoming commodities. Another example of this trend is the various documentary soaps on television, such as *Temptation Island*, where ordinary actors have been replaced by the neighbour next door, who

“plays” with his or her own life in front of a camera. As concerns the Internet, the main reasons for chatting are to have fun, to enjoy oneself, to talk about everything that comes into one’s mind – no strings attached. It is not common for the interviewees to chat with the same persons over a long period of time, which is necessary if one is to develop a true friendship. If a chat partner is boring, one just stops chatting and “chooses” another name/person (to be read ‘alternative’). With the mobile phone and SMS (Short Message Services), it has also become possible to get such amusement irrespective of physical setting – on the bus, in school, etc. At first glance, this reasoning among young people indicates a tendency towards interchangeable relationships, where the individual is preoccupied with his or her self-image and appearance. This is what Lasch (1979) would call the forms of life and selfhood discernible in the contemporary culture of narcissism. However, as the young people say, chatting with other people on the net is not perceived as talking to ordinary friends and, thereby, does not displace them, quite the contrary. Over and over again the value of one’s “real” friends, whom one meets everyday in school and with whom one talks about everything, including personal matters which would never be uttered on the chat lines, is emphasized during the interviews. Hence, with regard to friends, there seems to be a strict line between on-line and off-line. It remains to be seen whether this distinction will remain or whether these two spheres will become blurred in varied ways, mixing and resulting in the emergence of new types of relationships, where the word ‘friend’ will have taken on a new meaning. In addition to the neighbourhood playmate, the pen pal, and so forth, the interviewed young people talked about ‘chat friends’ and ‘e-mail friends’. Rather than replacing true friendship, the chat lines may offer additional creative and fluid social relationships. But of course the notion that subjects are conceived as any other consumer products is worth noting, and the future developments and social consequences of this process will be interesting to explore.

One of the consequences of this process of commodification is how the ability to remain anonymous while chatting seems to change the *moral rules of conduct*. We are, from a very young age, told to be honest and responsible for our own actions and their consequences. These moral codes are turned upside-down when one hears young people talk about how they enjoy lying when chatting. The issue of morality is not considered or reflected upon, as lying is the rule of the game, something everyone does – trust has been displaced by suspicion. This exemplifies how the meanings associated with chat originate in and are constructed from the interaction taking place among the participants within a particular chat line, and how its use may be misunderstood by an outsider who lacks insight into this specific discourse (cf. Gergen, 1997; Hernwall, 1999). This of course raises questions of whether this view of morality will generalize to other contexts of use in society or whether it is merely a re-definition of morality in the specific setting of chat lines.

The Contextualized Media Audience

The child's home is in constant interplay with external and dynamical factors, such as the local community, the school, associations, and the neighbourhood. The child encounters different media and uses them in these settings, which influences children's relationships to media, their choices, judgements and interpretation. Hence, media use does not occur in a vacuum, quite the contrary, media activities lead to various exchanges with parents, siblings, peers, and so forth. We have to locate media use in these various environmental layers in order to gain valuable insights into the various meanings and interpretations media users derive from media texts.

This chapter stresses the importance of perceiving the uses and interpretations of media content as situated activities. The process and significance of socially constructed meaning-making in daily media use are brought to the fore in terms of social, cultural and psychological availability, the social context of exposure, mediated experiences, and the surrounding media environment. Hence, media are mediated and understood through our culture as constituting a social process, which is received, modified, and adopted by the individual's everyday life. A medium, and its meaning, is not given beforehand, but is rather the result of human practices, which in turn are influenced by different sets of social, psychological, cultural, and historical practices and contexts (cf. Kitchin, 1998; Bjurström, Fornäs & Ganetz, 2000).

While this chapter aims at providing an understanding of and insight into the private settings of young people's media use, with a focus on the family/household and with reference to the peer group and leisure activities on a micro level, the next step is to link these uses of media to political, economical, and cultural processes in the public domain. This viewpoint is especially crucial in the debate on the effects of violent, racist, and gender stereotyped media content on today's children, as it turns our attention away from only "attacking" the media without reflecting upon the micro and macro level social and cultural contexts in which they are embedded. It is, of course, much easier to blame something concrete, something that one can touch and see with one's own eyes. Important questions to ask ourselves are why a specific content is the way it is, what it tells us about contemporary society, its values, acceptable behaviours, and so forth.

It is only by contextualizing media users in various settings that we can avoid describing young people's media use merely from the perspective of the 'technophile', who perceives media as harmless, but also from the perspective of the 'technophobe', who sees media as tools too dangerous for the vulnerable minds of children (cf. Walkerdine, 1998).

Notes

1. This chapter is based on the doctoral thesis 'Screen Rites: a study of Swedish young people's use and meaning-making of screen-based media in everyday life', October 2002 (Lund university, Dept. of Sociology, Media and Communication Studies). The thesis is partly based, both theoretically and empirically, on the material collected in the Swedish part (1997-1999) of the comparative project 'Children, Young People and the Electronic Media', but with a narrower focus on the age groups and the type of media included (see also Johnsson-Smaragdi, 1998; Livingstone, 1998; Krotz, 1999; Sjöberg, 1998, 1999; Livingstone, Holden & Bovill, 1999; Livingstone & Bovill, 2001). A variety of quantitative and qualitative methodologies are applied in the thesis, including survey questionnaires, interviews, drawings, and diaries. In an attempt to chart present changes and update the material collected within the first study, I conducted two additional in-depth studies on computer games (1999) and the Internet (2000). The "traditional" television is still, in an increasingly digital media environment, the most dominating and popular medium among young people (Johnsson-Smaragdi & Jönsson, 2001), and the research focus in the thesis is therefore on the screen-based media: television and computers (as regards computer games and the Internet). In short, the ages 8/9 and 12/13 are of interest for computer games, while the age groups 12/13 and 15/16 are included for television and the Internet.
2. The survey questions addressed both computer games and video games together.

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The media have always fascinated children and young people. The starting point for this book is to situate media research on children and young people in contemporary discourses on childhood and growing up in modern society.

The authors present recent Scandinavian qualitative studies, sometimes case studies, on how children use, interpret and negotiate the meaning of popular television programs, computer games and Internet. *Media Fascinations* provides insights into such diverse issues as media literacy, the gendered nature of the media, the role of children's socio-cultural background as well as how programming content influences meaning making. It also brings up issues concerning commercial versus public service programming for children as well as specific content features such as children's interpretations of irony and parody. Throughout the book, as a subtext, the authors show their awareness of the methodological issues involved in studying children's media use.

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