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Media Ethnography

An Other Story?

Over the last few years, the term ethnography has gained an increasing currency in qualitative media studies. So much so that in 1988 the American media researcher *James Lull* spoke of ethnography as having become 'an abused buzzword in our field' (*Lull* 1988: 242). In the following, I shall trace the development of media ethnography and its relation to problematics currently facing mass communications research. More specifically, I shall argue that behind the growing academic interest in ethnography lies a feminist legacy that is as important as it is underrated. In my view, we need to further the professional dialogue between qualitative media research and feminism. It is my main contention that media ethnography may gain in *theoretical precision* by being informed by theories that are seminal to feminist and ethnic studies. Moreover, I argue, media ethnography may gain in *empirical precision* by being much more narrowly defined than is currently the case among most researchers. I discuss these arguments by drawing on a recent trend in Scandinavian media ethnography that may point to future realignments.

Discursive History I:

The Academy

In order to understand the possibilities and possible predicaments facing media ethnography today, it is necessary that we situate its development within two frameworks: an academic framework of media studies and then the wider ramifications of recent socio-political changes. Viewed narrowly within a mass communications framework, media ethnography is borne by the interest in qualitative media studies that emerged as a distinctive trend from the late 1970s on. This research interest both marks an epistemological turn towards the mediated meaning-making of audiences and a methodological turn towards qualitative methods of empirical investigation, notably in-depth interviews. Qualitative media studies is often defined in opposition to quantitative sociological studies in mass communications, studies that particularly dominate North American research. Thus, in the first North American anthology on qualitative media research, *Natural Audiences*, the editors speak of qualitative studies as being part of *an 'interpretive* paradigm [that] takes its subjects to be the fields of meaning that pervade the projects of human life' (*Lindlof and Meyer* 1987: 4).

This interpretive paradigm is influenced from the 1960s on by *Harold Garfinkel's* ethnomethodology, by *Harold Blumer's* symbolic interactionism and by phenomenology in the manner of *Erving Goffman* and *Peter Berger* and *Thomas Luckmann*. These form influential,

if never dominant, strands in qualitative sociology building on the tradition that was formed by the renowned Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s.

In Britain, sociologists also pave the way for qualitative media studies, but here the formative influence is the cultural-studies tradition emerging in the 1970s from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University (CCCS was formed in 1964 by the literary critic *Richard Hoggart*). Much work at CCCS is inspired by the critical tradition of the Chicago School, but it is mingled with feminism, with semiology and with French structuralism and Italian political analysis in the manner of *Louis Althusser* and *Antonio Gramsci*. The CCCS plays a vital role in foregrounding critical discussions about media power and the complexities of viewing. Also, from early on ethnographic methods of investigation have struck important and influential notes in British cultural studies (*Willis* 1977, 1980; *McRobbie* 1978).

So, British and North American researchers follow rather different trajectories towards qualitative media studies. Still, Anglo-American perspectives today constitute an overarching interpretive framework of understanding this turn (*Lindlof and Meyer* 1987; *Brunsdon* 1989; *Morley and Silverstone* 1990; *Jankowski* 1991; *Jensen* 1991a). The discursive dominance of the Anglo-American paradigm of interpretation serves to obscure that a similar turn towards qualitative media studies appeared roughly at the same time, or even before, in several research milieus in countries as diverse as Australia (*Hodge and Tripp* 1986), Brazil (*Leal* 1986) and Germany (*Baacke et al.* 1990; *Rogge* 1989). It should be noted that English publication dates are a poor guide to the authors' national impact.

In the Nordic countries, media researchers from around 1970 develop a viable interest in popular reading that subsequently serves to pave the way for a more general interest in media audiences (see overview in *Ericson* 1987). Unlike Britain and North America, Nordic researchers often have an empirical background in the humanities and a theoretical background informed by German academic traditions such as critical theory and *Freudian* psychoanalysis. So the Nordic turn towards qualitative media studies takes a somewhat different route: it is approached from textual or linguistic analysis and not from a sociological perspective. This may explain why Nordic researchers, in addition to studying the mediated meaning-making of contemporary audiences, develop a historical perspective on empirical audience reception (*Drotner* 1983, 1988; *Malmgren* 1986; *Thavenius* 1991). The historical analyses are mostly inspired by German literary theories of *Wolfgang Iser* and *Robert Jauss*. Indeed, it is *Jauss* who coins the phrase 'reception theory' which is commonly used in Scandinavia more or less synonymously with qualitative audience research although the term often sits uneasily on English lips since it smacks of passive consumerism or hotel lobbies (see overviews in *Grimm* 1977; *Holub* 1984; *Jensen* 1991a).

Within this almost simultaneous and wide-ranging turn towards qualitative media studies, the term ethnography comes to occupy a key importance as a theoretical catch-phrase. Already in 1964 the American anthropologists *Dell Hymes* and *J.J. Gumpertz* had published a book called "*The Ethnography of Communication*" (*Gumpertz and Hymes* 1964). But only from the 1980s does ethnography in mass communication really take off. In 1980, *Lull* in an influential article on qualitative empirical audience research, calls for ethnographic methods as: "an integrated means for understanding the everyday world of social groups, their patterns of interpersonal communication, and their uses of the mass media. The intent of the ethnography of mass communication is to allow the researcher to grasp as completely as possible

with minimal disturbance the "native's perspective" on relevant communicative and sociocultural matters indigenous to him" (*Lull* 1980: 199)

In 1991, the British media researchers *David Morley* and *Roger Silverstone* in a review article defined media ethnography as the analysis of multiply structured contexts of action, aiming to produce a rich descriptive and interpretive account of the lives and values of those subject to investigation (*Morley and Silverstone* 1991: 149-50).

The Dutch media researcher, *Ien Ang*, in 1990 advocates 'a globalization of the ethnographic pursuit' (*Ang* 1990: 244) which she concretises as a necessity to oppose an institutional categorising of the illusive term 'audience' by applying an 'ethnographic understanding, a form of interpretive knowing that purports to increase our sensitivity to the particular details of the ways in which actual people deal with television in their everyday lives' (*Ang* 1991: 165). As may be seen, the term ethnography is commonly applied to denote an extension of reception studies in two directions: in empirical terms, the context of investigation is widened to include areas beyond the immediate situation of reception. In methodological terms, participant observation and informal talks are applied in order to complement in-depth interviews that form the basis of reception studies. Why does the term ethnography gain such professional popularity within such a short period of time? In order to answer that question, we have to look beyond the immediate professional context of media studies.

Discursive History II:

Social Context

The discursive popularity of ethnography must be seen within the wider ramifications of social realignments and cultural diversifications, developments that have been pertinent to public agendas since the 1970s. From then on, many countries have faced new challenges of becoming multicultural societies with a more international outlook and less economic independence. Ethnography of course originated within anthropology and ethnology in the last century as a systematic means to understand and explain cultural meanings that are unknown to the investigator. Not unnaturally, then, a growing number of researchers from the 1970s on look towards the ethnographic tradition in their attempts to analyse and understand new and complex developments closer to home.

For it must be remembered that media studies is neither the first nor the only area of research to adopt ethnographic methods of investigation. Beyond anthropology and ethnology, the research milieus that first take to ethnographic methodologies are often those that for better or worse are marginal to the academy (or: least bound by established institutional frameworks): feminist studies are pioneers here, closely followed by youth studies and ethnic studies. Within media studies, feminist scholars are among the first to seriously engage in reception studies and in adopting qualitative methodologies. Perhaps the first empirical investigation of media audiences is carried out as early as 1914 by the German sociologist and Weberian trainee *Emilie Altenloh*. In an extensive study of 2400 filmgoers, she includes interviews as well as survey methods; and although few today would embrace her cultural pessimism, her analysis is unique in demonstrating an acute awareness of both class and gender

differences (*Altenloh* 1914). Almost 30 years later, *Herta Herzog* conducts a study on American women listening to radio soaps (*Herzog* 1941). To my knowledge, none of these studies enter contemporary professional debate in any large measure, nor do they influence future research trends.

Another 30 years pass and in the late 1970s in Britain, women such as *Dorothy Hobson* go out to visit housewives interviewing them about their use of television (*Hobson* 1980). *Charlotte Brunsdon* in 1981 is perhaps the first to stress how important it is in media reception to make an analytical distinction between 'the subject positions that a text constructs and the social subject who may or may not take these positions up' (*Brunsdon* 1981: 32). In North America about the same time, *Tania Modleski* pioneers studies of women's genres with her work on daytime soaps (*Modleski* 1979, 1982). In the same year that sees *Modleski's* book in print, *Ien Ang* publishes her book on Dallas in Dutch (English translation: *Ang* 1985), while in Germany *Ellen Seiter* spurs reception studies also from the early 1980s. I publish the first results of my historical research on empirical media reception in 1983 (*Drotner* 1983), and one year later the first major contemporary reception study in Denmark is published, namely *Anne Hjort's* dissertation on "Dallas" (*Hjort* 1984) incidentally the same year that sees the *Radway* classic "Reading the Romance" in print (*Radway* 1984).

Discursive History III:

Feminism

Naturally feminist media researchers do not turn their interest towards audiences and qualitative methodologies because they are particularly innovative. With the clarity of hindsight I would say from personal experience that we did so from a combination of political and pragmatic reasons. Compared to large quantitative studies, interviewing and participant observation are inexpensive means of investigation. And in the late 1970s as today women researchers were marginal to the academy: we are used to wheeling and dealing and to applying the means at hand.

To this pragmatic explanation must be added a more substantive political one (often the one we choose to remember as the more important one): the early wave of feminist research was inspired by a dictum of performing research about women, by women and for women. As the American film historian *Ann Kaplan* has demonstrated (*Kaplan* 1986), feminism entails both political and philosophical aspects. And the early marriage between politicised feminism and academic research is not without its professional problems. These I will return to later on. For now it is important to stress that for better or worse the feminist turn towards reception studies is fundamentally coloured by political objectives: it is an attempt to address an invisible group or explore ignored genres in the communication process and hence illuminate texts and interpretations that had hitherto been subsumed under male forms of understanding and analysis. Academic research is seen as being part of wider cultural and social forms of agenda setting.

I said earlier that media ethnography springs from a growing interest in the complexities of mediated meaning-making. I also ventured that it is social realignments within modernity that

fundamentally serve to pave the way for the broad academic turn towards ethnography. That feminist researchers, as well as scholars in youth and ethnic studies, are among the pioneers in this development is no coincidence. It could be argued that over the last 20 years it is precisely women, young people and non-white groups who have spearheaded the more general developments in modernity towards internationalisation and multiculturalism. When women, Chicanos and young blacks entered the academy in larger numbers during the 1970s, their positions fundamentally served to politicise and dislocate established discursive hierarchies. So many researchers, men and women, blacks and whites, young and old, simply had to sensitise their theories and methodologies to a changing set of realities. And many of them did so.

In media research, women were not alone in turning their professional interests towards interpretive theories, qualitative methodologies, and empirical processes of reception. In North America, scholars such as *James Lull* and *James Anderson* are pivotal figures in shaping the interpretive paradigm of media research, in Britain *David Morley* has played an equally important role, while in Scandinavia researchers such as *Kim Schröder* and *Klaus Bruhn Jensen* inform qualitative media research from the mid-1980s on. Indeed, when reading today about the 'qualitative turn' in media research, one could easily get the impression that women had played a negligible role in bringing about that turn. Two examples may serve to substantiate my claim.

In *Natural Audiences*, *Timothy P. Meyer* and the editor *Thomas R. Lindlof* in a detailed and informative overview of the 'The Tools and Foundations of Qualitative Research' survey focal problems of theory and methodology in qualitative empirical media research: they critique the structuralist-functionalist paradigm and the hypothetico-deductive procedures dominating North American media research; they outline the sociological roots of their own stance; and they discuss central problems in conducting ethnographic (media) research in 'natural' environments, problems such as how to get entry into the social settings, status difference between researcher and informants, the use of audio-visual equipment in recording data and communicating results. Thus, for example, they rightly claim that 'to ameliorate status problems, ethnographers need to spend a large block of time with subjects to become accepted and, more importantly, to be trusted (...) A researcher needs to make subjects fully aware that they are the "experts" at doing what they do not the researcher, despite all of his or her credentials and training' (*Lindlof and Meyer* 1987: 16). Paying lip-service to gender differences ('his or her credentials') only serves to obscure substantial differences of power: credentials and training are not objective standards of expertise, and perhaps informants actually treat male and female researchers rather differently, just as male and female researchers may communicate rather different versions of expertise. I shall return to the question of gendered professionalism in a moment. But, first, let me note that *Lindlof and Meyer* speak from the discursive position of US media sociology, and their article deals with the multifarious problems of qualitative research methodologies. As such it is significant that they exclude from their discussion the numerous feminist contributions to precisely those issues (e.g. *Oakley* 1981; *Bowles and Klein* 1983; *Stanley and Wise* 1983).

My other example of feminist submersion is rather more intriguing if only because the theoretical and meta-discursive claims are loftier. *Klaus Bruhn Jensen* and *Nicholas Tankowski's* "A Handbook of Qualitative Methodologies for Mass Communication Research" is the first anthology to bring together the sociological and humanistic strands in qualitative media

research. Moreover, the editors in two comprehensive introductory chapters outline the meta-history of these formative strands. Now, any discourse of the past, including that of qualitative media history, is necessarily located within a particular perspective that shapes the outlook on that past. Such a perspective also colours Jankowski and Jensen's respective accounts and that is not very remarkable. What is perhaps more to the point is that such a perspective is never made explicit. This is all the more conspicuous since both authors call for self-reflexivity and interpretive theorising that confront the illusion of objective quantification. Starting 500 B.C. and spending 26 pages to outline the humanistic traditions in qualitative media studies, Jensen has no specific section on how feminist scholarship has helped shape those traditions. One mostly has to read between the lines. For example, Jensen pays much attention to e.g. literary criticism, semiology and cultural studies, whose influence is summed up in the following manner: "Cultural studies have served an important function within the humanities by re-evaluating popular culture as a both pleasurable and worthy discourse and as a relevant social resource, labeling, for example television as a modern bard (Fiske and Hartley 1978)". (*Jensen* 1991b: 30)

By speaking in general terms about cultural studies and by conflating the issues of media pleasure and social resources, *Jensen* underscores that it is feminist researchers who in the late 1970s were the ones to place pleasure on the theoretical and empirical agenda facing fierce opposition from their more Marxist male colleagues who tended to exclude pleasure from other social resources. It may be noted in passing that Jensen does not refer to these feminist scholars but to *Fiske and Hartley*. *Jensen* does credit feminism, however, for helping to undermine what he terms the 'logos tradition' underlying traditional humanistic scholarship. Still: "One essentialism lurking as a subtext in feminism itself is *biologism* the assumption, briefly, that "feminine" culture is inherently related to the female body and psyche, rather than being a social and historical construct. *At its best, however* [italics mine], feminism helps to differentiate other social and discourse theory. Even though qualitative analysis is not, to repeat, inherently 'feminine', many of the research issues and knowledge-interests articulated by feminist scholars, thematizing gender-specific languages and world-views, lend themselves well to qualitative methodologies." (*Jensen* 1991b: 30) When *Jensen* does mention feminism, it is a rather unspecified category that is seen as an aid to nuance an already established qualitative paradigm, not as an important pioneer in shaping that very paradigm.

Today many feminists spend more valuable time on discursive deconstructions of the past than on actual empirical work in the present. This can easily be denounced, and personally I do not wholesale embrace the discursive trend, even as I am at this very moment upholding its rules. The trend towards deconstructing public discourses on the audience, on our notions of femininity, or media violence can partly be explained as a result of the feminist researchers getting old. Many of the meta-deconstructivists hold full-time university positions where it can be difficult to find the time and the money to do actual field work (it takes endless amounts of time). The situation is adumbrated by an increasing pressure to publish or perish (or even publish and perish), and so more and more researchers turn towards rapid ruminations in front of the computer screen rather than to the more laborious tasks of field work.

On a more optimistic note, the trend towards deconstructing the feminist legacy can be explained as a result of the research field getting old: both post-war feminism and reception studies have now come of age, and we are actually in a position to look back and evaluate past

theoretical routes, both the byways and the highways (*Ang and Hermes* 1991). Women in modernity occupy a contradictory position between public and private domains of power, a position that perhaps has made feminist researchers particularly sensitive to rules of interpretation and discursive self-reflexion.

The Feminist Legacy in Media Studies

So what is the feminist legacy in media studies? As several researchers have noted (cp. overviews in *Kaplan* 1986; *Ang and Hermes* 1991) feminism has been instrumental in putting on the academic agenda vital *epistemological issues* that have since gained a wider recognition within academic discourse (and not only in interpretivist fields such as cultural studies): the contested notion of who is the 'other' is perhaps the most important of these issues. Already in 1949, *Simone de Beauvoir* wrote about women as "The Second Sex". The title neatly sums up Beauvoir's central contention: 'at the moment when man asserts himself as subject and free being, the idea of the other arises' (*de Beauvoir* 1953: 72). Woman is not only defined through her difference from the male norm, she is also a 'second' sex, a lesser being. Since then, the notions of otherness and difference have spurred vital discussions of power in a wide sense, discussions that are of central importance also to ethnographic studies. The early feminist objective of doing research of, for and by women was informed by intentions to illuminate this otherness, an enterprise that posed severe problems despite its noble claims (or because of them). The objective has served to stress similarities between researcher and the researched in an attempt to overcome positivist dichotomies between subject and object (*Klein* 1983; *Smith* 1987; *Davies and Esseveld* 1989). Feminist research should be a tool in the empowerment of women, but this emphasis upon reciprocity between the researcher and her informants has often served to obscure the researcher's divergent interests and aims, and consequently many feminist researchers have been ill-prepared to face ethical problems of interpretation. What happens, for example, if informants turn against the researcher's interpretation? Who should have the last say?

Related to the notion of doing research of, for and by women is an epistemological acknowledgement that all research is by necessity partial, not objective. This notion is certainly shared and reinforced by critical, especially Marxist, forms of interpretation. But most feminists have systematically connected reflections on social partiality to self-reflexive discussions on the researcher's role (*Mies* 1983; *Stanley and Wise* 1983; *Krieger* 1985). Several researchers have also stressed the praxis dimension of research, a dimension that serves to undermine futile debates between applied vs basic research (*Ortner* 1984; *Smith* 1987). In *theoretical terms,* feminists have from the outset been committed to theoretical cross-fertilisation and interdisciplinary work. These approaches have enriched the empirical fields of study, just as they have forged vital bonds across academic and national borders. But equally important such caleidoscopic perspectives have demonstrated that the complexities of modernity cannot be grasped and understood by a single master theory.

Empirically, the feminist legacy in media studies is seen most clearly in two areas: textual genres and reception sites. The growing interest in genre is heavily influenced by the reworkings of classical film theories of genre that feminist studies of soap opera and romance-reading

made necessary. Also part of a feminist legacy is the contemporary acknowledgement that the home plays a vital part as a material and symbolic site of media reception. As James Lull has recently noted (*Lull* 1990: 11-12), there is a long tradition in qualitative sociology to focus on the family as a locus of research. Feminists have both revived and reworked these traditions: they have illuminated women's unpaid work in the home, they have stressed the importance played by informal networks and the intimacies of family life, just as they have deconstructed the discursive normality of the nuclear family that for example often determines how television editors schedule primetime flow.

But in empirical terms, feminists' active involvement of informants, for example, is also problematic. It has been used by researchers as an argument for getting closer to actual life and genuine expression (*Du Bois* 1983; *Reinharz* 1983; *Lather* 1988). Such notions, I would contend, are rooted in academic problems of professional legitimation more than they result from empirical processes of interpretation. Finally, in *methodological terms* the feminist legacy materialises itself as a widespread recognition of the strengths found in qualitative methodologies for better or worse. For we are only now beginning to realise what detrimental effects the feminist emphasis on qualitative methods has had upon quantitative studies and upon feminism.

Feminist researchers, then, have been pioneers although not the only ones in furthering ethnographic approaches to the media. But their pioneering contribution is inversely proportional to the academic integration now enjoyed by reception studies. The diversity of feminist work tends to be obscured by a few leading lights such as *Ien Ang* and *Janice Radway* who are routinely referenced by male colleagues as token allegiance to their feminist awareness. But even *Ang's* and *Radway's* fine research are rarely read by men, let alone influencing their thoughts. I have found it timely to recapitulate the feminist contribution in order to stress two points: firstly, feminists have been pioneers in tackling problematics of epistemology, analysis and interpretation, problematics that are central to ethnographic studies. Secondly, these insights are seldom shared by or even acknowledged by other researchers. As reception studies has gained in academic acceptance, the feminist legacy has been diminished or forgotten.

From Difference to Diversity: Finding a Common Language?

I find an intensified dialogue between feminism and qualitative media studies of vital importance, not in order that we form a new synthesis or grant wholesale acceptance of one or another stance. Rather, an intensified dialogue may advance our insights into the pitfalls and possibilities in qualitative methods in general and in ethnographic studies in particular. We are facing a complex social reality that in my opinion we cannot and should not hope to interpret and understand by constructing one central theoretical perspective. As I have already mentioned, the complexity of modernity in its present state is best matched by a multifaceted theoretical approach. Feminists have gained knowledge in such work that it can prove destructive to overlook.

One area immediately presents itself for developing this professional dialogue, namely the so-called postmodern ethnography. While media researchers, not least from the humanities, through the 1980s have approached ethnographic methods, ethnographers have approached

literary studies in their discussions of ethnographic writing. Anthropologists such as *James Clifford* and *George Marcus* criticise scholars within their own field of being naive realists in interpreting ethnographic data. They advocate a radical deconstruction of the anthropologist's role as organising force in the collection and analysis of data. The researcher should be displaced to a position 'at the edge of the frame' (*Clifford* 1986: 1). Instead informants' voices of otherness should gain access to the research results, so that it is up to the reader to construct his or her own interpretation. Such ideas certainly ring familiar bells to feminists, as I have indicated above. Still, as American anthropologists such as Marilyn Strathern and Judith Stacey have recently demonstrated (*Strathern* 1987; *Stacey* 1988; see also *Opie* 1992), very few of the postmodern ethnographers, most of them male, apply or even acknowledge feminist theorisings on the matter. Why is that?

First, we must realise that when *James Clifford*, for example, speaks about deconstructing the voice of the researcher in order to question the power of his interpretation, he speaks from a professional position that has been defined, safeguarded and upheld through almost a century by means of a variety of institutional and discursive practices. He possesses a professional 'oneness' that makes it relatively safe for him to acknowledge separation, difference and 'otherness'. But when *Stacey*, for example, disclaims her professional 'oneness' and foregrounds her informants' voices she does so from a position where her feminist professionalism is already an 'other' within the academic establishment. A feminist scholar still speaks in another professional voice than most of her male colleagues, and so from the outset her deconstructive efforts duplicate her 'otherness' rather than question her oneness, to remain within my metaphor.

The feminist point of departure severely complicates her acknowledgement of separation from her informants while it sustains her acknowledgement of reciprocity. A similar situation faces black or Chicano ethnographers as their severe critique of the postmodernist ethnographers indicate *(Cultural Studies* 1990). In a cogent critique of postmodern relativism, the American historian *Nancy Hartsock* states: "Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be theorized. Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of systematically and rationally organizing human society become dubious and suspect (...). How can we transform our imposed Otherness into a self-defined specificity?" (Hartsock 1990: 163-4, 171)

Women in general and non-white women in particular today juggle questions like these, and the answers many come up with are highly relevant for qualitative empirical media studies. We face a social and cultural set of realities that sensitise us to ambivalent processes of diversity and differentiation rather than to the more stable dichotomies of difference and otherness. The American feminist *Christine Di Stefano* neatly sums up what this perspective may imply for the concept of gender: 'gender is basic in ways that we have yet to fully understand, (...) it functions as "a difference that makes a difference," even as it can no longer claim the legitimating mantle of the difference' (*Di Stefano* 1990: 78). So, even if postmodern ethnography and feminism share vital problematics, there are still very real structural obstacles to shaping and sustaining theoretical and empirical dialogues. To these structural obstacles

should be added a more banal but equally basic pragmatic obstacle: no feminist scholar, and these are still mostly women, can ever hope to remain within the academic establishment without knowing about and intervening into its reigning discourses. Reigning discourses are shaped by the majority. And the majority is male. No young man encounters similar obstacles if he ignores feminist discourses. This mundane difference fundamentally serves to limit the dialogue between feminism and the academy: they simply do not share a common language. This discursive discrepancy is a severe hindrance for a more sophisticated, nuanced and, in the final analysis, useful media research.

Because feminist research has overwhelmingly been qualitative in nature, its recent process of epistemological and theoretical self-reflexion could become very useful to media ethnography if only it was shared, opposed or applied also by our male colleagues. Let me conclude this section by indicating a few of the discussion themes: qualitative methodology sharpens demands of defining the reliability of our results. Like many others, feminists call for diversity and self-reflexivity in this process. In ethnographic studies, we must reduce our claims to what conclusions may be drawn. Media ethnography is merely one brand in mass communication. It should not claim to say it all. Though what it says is as important and as complete as any other part of research.

The discussion of reliability in media studies in general and media ethnography in particular is often tackled as a question of macro vs micro analysis. Recently, the British media researcher *John Corner* in an otherwise perceptive article warns against an increasing divergence between what he terms 'the public knowledge project' and the 'popular culture' project in media studies. In the former, one is primarily concerned with news and current affairs, in the latter one tends to focus on fiction and entertainment. According to *Corner,* this alleged divergence: "... in certain versions of the reception perspective, (...) seems to have amounted to a form of sociological quietism, or loss of critical energy, in which increasing emphasis on the micro-processes of viewing relations displaces (though rarely explicitly so) an engagement with the macro-structures of media and society." (*Corner* 1991: 269)

Here, *Corner's* distinction between macro and micro levels of analysis slides into a discussion of political hierarchies: micro-analysis has to do with 'viewing relations' i.e. people's mediated meaning-making as part of their everyday cultures in the family, the shopping mall or amongst friends. Conversely, macro-analysis deals with the structures of 'media and society' i.e. the fundamental issues of economic production and institutional politics. *Corner* unquestioningly equals at least certain unspecified forms of micro-analysis with a 'loss of critical energy while macro-analysis per definition seems to be more political in nature.

What *Corner* and others in their distinction between micro and macro analyses fail to acknowledge or do not want to admit is that such a political hierarchy also harbours a gendered hierarchy of power. In political and economic matters, a male discourse traditionally dominates, while discourses of caring and nurturing that are traditionally ascribed as feminine underly people's everyday cultures. But that does not necessarily mean that analyses of viewing relations are any less political in nature. However, their definition of media politics may be somewhat different than *Corner's* ideal.

That this is what is actually at stake becomes clear when *Corner* bemoans the empirical results of the alleged divergence between the public knowledge and popular culture projects: it has implied a decreasing interest in the study of news and current affairs, which is incidentally

Corner's own research area. The popularity of studying soaps and other popular fiction has detrimental effects according to *Corner:* 'along with the steady institutionalization of articular version of the reception agenda has gone a relative lack of interest in questions of perception, comprehension and understanding' (*Corner* 1991: 277). But 'perception, comprehension and understanding' are not monolithic categories and what a number of mainly feminist studies on popular fiction have attempted to do, irrespective of their shortcomings in other respects, is not only to redress the balance previously tipped in favour of news analysis, it is precisely to redefine categories such as comprehension and understanding along gendered lines. If we are to bridge what *Corner* and others define as a divergence between perception and pleasure, information and entertainment, it seems vital that we transcend the dichotomy of macro vs micro analysis while acknowledging the discursive hierarchies that such dichotomy implies. Only then are we able to tackle the empirical negotiations and transformations made between masculine and feminine cultural positions. One way in which we may advance our theoretical understanding of media ethnography is to define more precisely what we mean by the term.

Defining Media Ethnography

As mentioned above, media ethnography is mainly defined as an extension of reception studies, either in empirical terms, in methodological terms or both. Conversely, I propose that *media ethnography offers a revision of reception studies. First*, and most importantly, media ethnography represents a radical *shift of epistemological focus* in media studies (*Drotner* 1992, 1993): its point of departure is the social interaction within a specific group of people (often limited in number and defined by the local area in which they live, work or go to school); and the researcher investigates how a variety of media operate and acquire meaning within this field of interaction. In all other media research, our starting point is a specific mass medium or a certain genre that may variously be analysed in relation to aspects of production, distribution and/or reception or a combination of all these aspects.

Secondly, ethnographic media studies differ from other interpretive traditions in their *temporal and spatial organisation of the empirical investigation.* The researcher immerses herself or himself into the 'field' for extended periods of time following informants in their daily routines at work or school, in their homes or attending their various leisure pursuits. The long time scale and the variety of 'natural' locations are perhaps the single most distinctive features of media ethnography. Other aspects are the attention paid to the processual character of social interaction it is the interpersonal patterns of activity that the ethnographer prioritises.

Thirdly, as for *methodology* media ethnography draws on a variety of classical anthropological and ethnological methods of investigation: participant observation, informal talks and in-depth or life-course interviews, diaries kept by the informants as well as self-reports kept by the researcher. In addition, he or she may apply textual analysis of for example selected television programmes, musical scores or magazine genres. The data are all qualitative in nature and collected by a number of methods. This methodological variety is often termed 'triangulation' (*Denzin* 1978). It should be noted, however, that the concept is not limited to methodological issues, it is also used about the application of different theories to a specific

study, just as triangulation may denote that the researcher illuminates an empirical issue or a process by collecting data about it at different times or by using different informants. Whether applied as a methodological, theoretical or empirical tool, triangulation generates material that is as diverse as it is heterogeneous. This heterogeneity does not necessarily create a more 'true' or 'complete' picture. Indeed, it is often the discrepancies that are most significant and revealing. As such, triangulation is uniquely suited to studying mediated communication in complex social settings.

Even so, heterogeneity does not imply wilful relativism. The diversity of data, for example, should be offset by the researcher's systematic collection of material and an equally systematic analytical comparison of data. Empirical material may be said to consist of informative as well as interpretive components. Thus, if an informant tells that she got her first walkman in 1982, less interpretation is probably involved than if she tells about her musical experiences on having acquired the new gadget. Actions are not accidental and open to any interpretation: Although people do, indeed, forget the exact dates of certain occurrences that does not imply that nothing occurred at all. Triangulation sharpens the necessary claims for analytical rigour made on all qualitative studies.

Triangulation also makes it vital that the researcher operates between inductive and deductive levels of analysis. As other qualitative approaches, ethnography is basically an inductive form of study in that theoretical concepts are generated from empirical data. This is what the American sociologists *Barney Glaser* and *Anselm Strauss* have forcefully termed 'grounded theory' (*Glaser and Strauss* 1967). Again, an inductive approach does not make theoretical deduction impossible or unnecessary. We all start with hypotheses, inklings and informed guesses about our particular field of study. But, contrary to quantitative studies, our hypotheses may not only be proven true or false, they may disappear or be substituted by other concepts altogether. Inductive approaches are not per definition a-theoretical, but their forms of theorising are different from quantitative approaches. Applying ethnographic means of triangulation only makes this insight more vital to acknowledge. Ethnographies obtain their scientific validity through our systematic collection and interpretation of data, not by the findings being generalised to cover other groups, nor quantified into an overall truth. As *Clifford Geertz* says in his now classic statement in the introduction to *The Interpretation of Cultures:* 'it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something' (*Geertz* 1973: 20).

Finally, such rigour also calls for a well-developed sense of reflexivity on the part of the researcher as often observed (*Hammersley and Atkinson* 1983: 14-23, 227-36). Following my 'narrow' definition of media ethnography, I would contend that self-reflexivity in media ethnography necessitates that studies are carried out by single researchers. Or, in collective projects, self-reflexivity puts very high claims on an intimate cooperation between the researchers involved. That in itself restricts the size of the research group.

Scandinavian Media Ethnography

Given the emphasis I place on extended field work, on the variety of locations and the restrictions on research groups, my definition of media ethnography excludes much of what today is discussed as part of that concept. Conversely, my definition would encompass many

studies that are conventionally labeled youth studies, ethnic studies or urban studies. Limiting the perspective to the area of youth research, the Nordic countries have formed a fertile soil through the 1980s for ethnographic media studies. Before presenting a few of these studies, I would like to note that ferment for this proliferation has been an expansion in the field of youth studies through the 1980s that within media studies took place somewhat before. Moreover, during that decade the combined forces of media commodification and globalization have made many media researchers focus on political and technological issues to an extent that youth studies, and indeed women's studies, did not.

Still, like other areas of research, youth studies is marked by distinct differences among the Nordic countries, especially with regard to institutionalisation and government intervention and interest. Thus, in *Sweden* the research councils subsidise local research milieus, while in *Finland* and *Norway*, for example, central research centres are subsidised by the government. In *Denmark* and *Iceland,* the picture is more chequered and versatile. Nordic media ethnographies form no trend within youth studies, nor within media studies, but they may signify a beginning. They are all characterised by their small scale and by their interdisciplinary aims. Projects are carried out by individual researchers or groups of two or three colleagues. Moreover, for reasons mentioned above, media ethnographies have by and large been developed by research fellows, not by media departments or permanently employed academics. For better or worse, these circumstances mark the actual investigations.

The earliest of these is also the most comprehensive. In the mid-1980s, *Johan Fornäs*, *Ulf Lindberg* and *Ove Sernhede* conducted a two-year study of young Swedes' making of rock music. Informed by German theories of modernity, "Under rocken" (*Fornäs et al.* 1988) not only offers a detailed analysis of the aesthetics in rock playing, it equally situates these processes in relation to media reception and to the wider issue of identity-formation in contemporary urban areas. A similar scope lies behind *Odd Are Berkaak's* study of young people's music-making in a local area of Oslo, "Erfaringer fra risikosonen: opplevelse, utforming og traderingsmönster i rock and roll" (*Berkaak* 1989; see also *Berkaak and Ruud* 1992). However, *Berkaak's* training in social anthropology makes him more interested in the symbolism of social interaction than in the actual musical performances.

In Denmark, two media ethnographies have been performed, both focusing on video. *Tove Arendt Rasmussen's* "Tror du kun det er dig, der har öjne: actionfilm og drengekultur" (*Rasmussen* 1990) is a participant-observation study on adolescent boys' video-reception in a local youth club, and the author stresses the interaction not only among the boys but between the group of viewers and the video texts. My own study "At skabe sig selv: ungdom, æstetik, pædagogik" (*Drotner* 1991a; *Drotner* 1989) was also carried out in a youth club (ungdomsskole) and focuses on the gendered meaning-making involved in aesthetic production and reception. In addition, I discuss why mediated cultures become increasingly popular and necessary for a modern formation of identity.

As may be seen from my cursory descriptions, these examples of Nordic media ethnographies all approach modern media through their appropriation by specific groups. That these groups are all made up of adolescents is no coincidence. Throughout modernity, young people have been among the first to appropriate new media as part of their leisure pursuits. Thus, to study mediated youth cultures offers an important key to understanding how new meaning processes materialise: what aspects are developed, which ones discarded? How are identities

articulated in and through particular media? In answering questions such as these, the researchers to varying degrees traverse the borderland lying between media and cultural analysis without making one a context of the other. Most are also gender sensitive and self-reflexive about their own roles (see especially *Fornäs et al.* 1990), and several of them illuminate the ways in which media may operate both as sources of reception and forms of production. Finally, Nordic studies such as these serve to disclaim Lull's scathing remark that *Janice Radway* and *David Morley* seem to be the only ones in cultural studies who have made systematic, face-to-face contact with audience members in order to construct descriptions and theoretical accounts of the audience's feelings and activities' (*Lull* 1988: 240).

Ethnographic methods, the long time spent with informants in a variety of social settings, enhance our possibilities of grasping how textual positions become articulations of gendered identities. These processes are as complex as they are contingent. Not unnaturally they are some of the least explored in media studies *(Ang and Hermes* 1991: 316; *Drotner* 1991b), and discursive knowledge of masculine and feminine textual positions are not enough to understand these processes. Last but not least, ethnographic studies in the narrow definition that I propose point beyond epistemology to what Jürgen Habermas would call the knowledge interests underlying our research: why do we do it? Is our object as media researchers to enrich our understanding of the media? Or, are we ultimately more interested in nuancing our understanding of other people and ourselves? As in all good stories, there is not only one or an Other solution.

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Summary – Zusammenfassung

The author traces the development of media ethnography and its relation to problematics currently facing mass communications research. More specifically, she argues that behind the growing academic interest in ethnography lies a feminist legacy that is as important as it is underrated. In the author's view, an intensified dialogue between feminism and qualitative media studies is of vital importance, above all to advance insight into pitfalls and problems in qualitative methods in general and in ethnographic studies in particular. She contends that media ethnography may gain in *theoretical* precision by taking note of theories that are seminal to feminist and ethnic studies. Also, that it may gain in *empirical* precision by being much more narrowly defined than is presently the case. In discussing these arguments, she draws on a recent trend in Scandinavian media ethnography which may point to future realignments.

Die Autorin spürt in ihrem Artikel der Entwicklung einer "Media Ethnographie" nach und deren Beziehung zur Problematik der heutigen Massenkommunikationsforschung. So findet sie, daß hinter dem wachsenden akademischen Interesse für Ethnographie ein feministisches "Legat" stecke, daß so wichtig wie auch unterrepräsentiert sei. Die Autorin fordert, daß die "Media Ethnographie" in ihrer theoretischen Präzision auch Aufmerksamkeit für die feministischen und ethnischen Studien widmen möge. Gleichzeitig müßten die empirischen Untersuchungen vorangetrieben werden. Während sie diese Argumente vorträgt, zeichnet sie den heutigen Trend innerhalb der "Media Ethnographie" Skandinaviens nach, die als Zukunftsausrichtung für solche Untersuchungen angesehen werden sollte.

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