PART I

THE SHAPE OF AUDIENCE RESEARCH

1

INTRODUCTION
Three Phases of Reception Studies

Pertti Alasuutari

The key idea of this book is to argue that a 'third generation' of reception studies and audience ethnography is presently taking shape and will establish itself in the near future. However, the division of the development of reception studies and audience research into three 'generations' outlined in this introductory chapter must not be taken matter-of-factly. Rather,. the outline of the suggested division should be seen as a way of pointing out an emergent trend, a direction audience research could take. There are elements in the present research that already lead the way to the new agenda that future research should, in my view, address, but a solid body of research tackling the new field of research is yet to be done. I hope that with the book at hand we can help to address the new questions and outline the basic dimensions of the new field.

The role of this book, in other words, is to act as a midwife: to suggest a 'story line' in cultural media research, a way to read its history in such a way that it points to the emergent trend outlined here and illustrated, developed and discussed in the chapters of this book. This of course means that the history of the 'three generations' told here is a retrospective view, a history of the present (as Foucault says histories always are) or of an anticipated future. Because media audience and reception research has been a rich and many-faceted field, there would be many other ways to tell

its history. Other stories would take up other aspects in the development of the field, and would thus imply different worthwhile future trends. The future is always open, and there will most probably be several future trends in the field. As long as future developments are solutions to problems perceived in past and present research, they will affect history-writing.

The 'three generations' talked about here must be understood metaphorically also in the sense that the tradition of cultural media research is at most a loose 'school' and has throughout the years since its inception incorporated research undertaken in other fields as influential parts of the 'tradition'. In that sense, its histories can only be told retrospectively, from the viewpoint of the present and future rather than the perspective of the motives of the researchers counted as part of that 'tradition'. The influences of James Lull's (1980a, 1980b) and Janice Radway's (1984) studies serve as good examples of this.

To recapitulate, the history of cultural media research told here is not the only possible line of development that could be discerned in the field. However, that does not mean that it is totally unsubstantiated. Instead, I argue that many researchers in the field perceive the history in the way it is outlined here. The 'inscribed audience' trend of media research is taking its shape. To draw an outline of the emergent agenda, of the questions addressed within it, let us first discuss the three phases of cultural media research.

The first generation: reception research

The birth of reception studies in mass communication research is typically dated back to Stuart Hall's (1974) *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, which in its earliest version came out as a 'Stencilled Occasional Paper,' No. 7 in the Media Series of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. What became known as reception research in media studies was from the very beginning associated with cultural studies and the Birmingham Centre, although it has later been pointed out that reception theory also has other roots. First, in a sense it carried on and readdressed the themes already raised in what was known as the 'uses and gratifications' paradigm. Second, reception studies in mass communication research was historically preceded and later influenced by German reception theory developed in late 1960s literary criticism.[1]

Despite other roots and influences, Hall's encoding/decoding article laid the foundation for and articulated the problems to be addressed in the 'reception paradigm' of what became known as 'media studies'. Media studies was understood as a branch of the broader intellectual movement called cultural studies. Hall's article really presents a fairly simple model, but it was partly just because of its elegant simplicity that it gained a reputation as a key text.

When compared to earlier communication models (e.g. Gerbner, 1956; Lasswell, 1948; Shannon and Weaver, 1963), Hall's encoding/decoding model is actually not a very radical change. Like the older models, it approaches (mass) communication as a process whereby certain messages are sent and then received with certain effects. For instance, it does not approach television and other mass media in themselves as part of modern society and its structures, and neither does it address the fact that the media are constitutive of or at least affect the communicated events. However, the reception paradigm Hall promoted did involve a shift from a technical to a semiotic approach to messages. A message was no longer understood as some kind of a package or a ball that the sender throws to the receiver. Instead, the idea that a message is encoded by a programme producer and then decoded (and made sense of) by the receivers means that the sent and received messages are not necessarily identical, and different audiences may also decode a programme differently. Hall does not altogether dismiss the assumption that a message may have an effect, but the semiotic framework he introduces means that one moves away from a behaviouristic stimulus–response model to an interpretive framework, where all effects depend on an interpretation of media messages.

> At a certain point [. . .] the broadcasting structures must yield an encoded message in the form of a meaningful discourse. The institution–societal relations of production must pass into and through the modes of a language for its products to be 'realized'. This initiates a further differentiated moment, in which the formal rules of discourse and language operate. Before this message can have an 'effect' (however defined), or satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be perceived as a meaningful discourse and meaningfully de-coded. It is this set of de-coded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences. (Hall, 1974: 3)

With this linguistic or semiotic turn that Hall proposes, the arguments about effects are effectively swallowed up or at least made dependent upon people's interpretations or thought processes. This turn could have led directly to a kind of radical phenomenology where everything – including, say, the 'structures of production' Hall talks about – is conceived as a social and linguistic construct. Instead of such a big leap, Hall concentrates on applying the semiotic perspective to what he calls the 'determinate moments' of first 'encoding' and then 'decoding'.

> In the moment when the historical event passes under the sign of language, it is subject to all the complex 'rules' by which language signifies. To put it paradoxically, the event must become a 'story' before it can become a *communicative event*. In that moment, the formal sub-rules of language are 'in dominance', without, of course, subordinating out of existence the historical event so signified, or the historical consequences of the event having been signified in this way. (Hall, 1974: 2)

Questions about the role of language and signification are a can of worms in social sciences. Keeping the can firmly closed leads to a mechanistic and simplistic understanding of social phenomena, but once you open it there is the danger that the worms will eat the whole theoretical structure and notion of society. Hall's solution to just peek into the can is clever: he is able to take the role of rhetoric into account to some extent, but otherwise – for instance as far as his notion of social structures is concerned – he sticks to a realistic conception of language.

However, this solution led to an obsession with 'determinate moments', especially the moment of 'decoding', in reception research. From the perspective of the encoding/decoding model it appears that the ideological effects of programming are dependent on the particular strategic moment when the encoded media message enters the brain of an individual viewer.

Hall (1974) suggests that there are four 'ideal-type' positions from which decodings of mass communication by the audience can be made: within the *dominant or hegemonic code* the connotative level of the messages is decoded in terms of the dominant of preferred meanings; the *professional code* is what the professional broadcasters employ when transmitting a message which has already been signified in a hegemonic manner; the *negotiated code* contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements; and finally the *oppositional code* is the position where a viewer perfectly understands both the literal and connotative inflection given to an event, but determines to decode the message 'in a globally contrary way'.

The encoding/decoding model suggested by Hall created a series of empirical studies about the reception of television programmes by different audiences, the first one of which was David Morley's *The Nationwide Audience* (1980).[2] By selecting different groups of people and showing them the *Nationwide* public affairs television programme, Morley could more or less confirm and develop Hall's idea about the four codes discussed above. For instance, the art students whose reception of the programme Morley studied more or less represented the 'professional code'. An innovative, schematic theory had led to the beginning of an empirical project to be carried on by an enthusiastic group of new researchers.

The second generation: audience ethnography

Morley's seminal study was soon followed by studies about the reception of, especially, romantic serials (Ang, 1985; Hobson, 1982; Katz and Liebes, 1984; Liebes, 1984; Liebes and Katz, 1990). What became known as qualitative audience reception studies meant that one analyses a programme and studies its reception among a particular audience by conducting 'in-depth' interviews of its viewers. However, along with an increasing number of empirical reception studies, there occurred a series of gradual

shifts in the whole reception paradigm, so that we could say that a new *audience ethnography* paradigm was created.

First, there was a move away from an interest in conventional politics to identity politics, particularly to questions about gender. This can be seen, for instance, in the fact that a slackening interest in the reception of public affairs programmes was balanced out by a growing interest in fictional programmes, particularly romantic serials. These studies concentrated on the politics of gender, on the discourses within which gender is dealt with in the programmes, and how women viewers interpret and make use of the offered readings against the background of their everyday life and experiences. As Ann Gray points out in Chapter 2, feminist scholarship especially has had an important role here in breaking new ground and addressing new questions in reception research.

Second, at the expense of a diminishing interest in programme contents, much more emphasis was laid on the functions of the medium, as is the case with, for instance, James Lull's (1980a, 1980b) analyses of the social uses of television or David Morley's *Family Television* (1986). The growing interest in the functions of television in the family could be seen partly as a rebirth of the older American uses and gratifications paradigm. However, unlike the old paradigm, in the new audience ethnography one focuses on television as a social resource for conversation or on the way in which television use reflects and reproduces (gendered) relations of power in family life. A large project about the role of information and communication technologies in the home also reflected the increased interest in the social uses of television and other media (Silverstone, 1991; Silverstone et al. 1991).

Third, even when the studies of this second generation dealt with a particular programme or serial, researchers started to look at reception from the audience's end of the chain. One does not try to explain a reception of a programme by probing into an 'interpretive community' (Fish, 1979). Instead, one studies the everyday life of a group, and relates the use of (a reception of) a programme or a medium to it. One studies the role of the media in everyday life, not the impact (or meaning) of everyday life on the reception of a programme (e.g. Gray, 1992; Hermes, 1995).

People representing the second generation of reception studies like to emphasize that they are doing or that one should do proper ethnographic case studies of 'interpretive communities'. One even talks about an 'ethnographic turn' quite comparable to the previous 'linguistic turn'. Like classic anthropologists such as Malinowski (1961 [1922]), it has been argued that a proper ethnographic study in audience ethnography entails at least several months' stay in the 'field' (Drotner, 1992) – a demand which, strangely enough, is presented at a time when anthropologists and qualitative sociologists are increasingly questioning the whole notion of a 'field' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). On the other hand, what is called an 'ethnographic study' often simply amounts to qualitative 'in-depth' interviews of a group of people, which is of course quite understandable as one bears in mind

that most television or video viewing takes place in very small and private settings. There are restrictions to an ethnographer's possibilities of doing a long-term participant observation study in a home.

The third generation: a constructionist view

The starting point for the new agenda of cultural audience studies could be dated back to the late 1980s, when a number of writers began to question and discuss the premises of audience ethnography (Allor, 1988; Ang, 1989, 1990; Fiske, 1988, 1990; Grossberg, 1988; Lull, 1988; Radway, 1988). For instance Allor (1988), Grossberg (1988) and Radway (1988) emphasized that there isn't really such a thing as the 'audience' out there; one must bear in mind that audience is, most of all, a discursive construct produced by a particular analytic gaze. As Grossberg puts it, 'media audiences are shifting constellations, located within varying multiple discourses which are never entirely outside of the media discourse themselves' (1988: 386). Radway (1988) emphasized that, instead of one particular circuit of producer, text and audience, people's daily lives must be the point of departure and object of research. Traditional ethnography was heavily criticized. On the other hand, other researchers, such as Lull (1988), were concerned with a development where some cultural studies theorists were enthusiastic about the impossibility of doing empirical work, although (or because) they had never even tried it.

We must not, however, conceive of the third generation as a clear-cut paradigm with a definite time of birth, let alone a list of studies or researchers representing it. It is an emergent trend, evident not only in the critical discussion outlined above but also in the 'discussion' parts of many 'second generation' studies, where researchers place their study in a larger framework.

This wave of critique and self-reflection meant a thorough rethinking of the place of the media in everyday life, the concept of 'audience' and, along with that, the place of media research itself in the whole picture. As a consequence, a new agenda or third generation of cultural audience studies emerged, although many of its implications are still to be spelled out.

The third generation entails a broadened frame within which one conceives of the media and media use. One does not necessarily abandon ethnographic case studies of audiences or analyses of individual programmes, but the main focus is not restricted to finding out about the reception or 'reading' of a programme by a particular audience. Rather, 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. One is interested in the discourses within which we conceive

of our roles as the public and the audience, and how notions of programmes-with-an-audience or messages-with-an-audience are inscribed in both media messages and assessments about news events and about what is going on in the 'world'. The third generation resumes an interest in programmes and programming, but not as texts studied in isolation from their usage as a element of everyday life. Furthermore, it adds a neglected layer of reflexivity to the research on the 'reception' of media messages by addressing the audience's notions of themselves as the 'audience'.

The second generation of reception studies involved a move away from the media to 'interpretive communities' of the everyday, even to the extent that, for instance, Jensen argued that 'the central object of analysis of mass communication research lies outside the media, in the cultures and communities of which media and audiences are constituents' (1990: 14). As Schrøder puts it, 'this development towards ethnography and the everyday is now threatening to write the media, as the focus of research, out of existence' (1994: 338). The third generation brings the media back to media studies, but conceives of the media and media messages in a broader sense than just as an encoded text to be then decoded by a particular 'interpretive community'. A study may start out from such a research design, but the big picture one wants to shed light on, or the big question to pursue, is the cultural place of the media in the contemporary world. It may entail questions about the meaning and use of particular programmes to particular groups of people, but it also includes questions about the frames within which we conceive of the media and their contents as reality and as representations – or distortions – of reality. And how are these frames or discourses about the programmes and about viewing and audiences inscribed in the programmes themselves? What are the cultural concerns that surround media use and media messages? This big research programme also includes questioning the role of media research itself. How are these concerns inscribed in the theoretical models of mass communication research? What is the place of expert knowledge produced by media researchers in enhancing or quieting down public concerns, and in reproducing or transforming the frames within which the media and 'audiencing' (that is, being in the position of the audience, see Fiske 1993) are perceived?

This does not mean that everything should be attempted in any single study. Neither does it imply that we should return to a macro-level investigation of the function of the media, and forget about 'audience ethnographies'. Rather, in a way the new agenda of audience research reclaims the meaning of ethnography. Among anthropologists ethnography means something like 'social and cultural analysis in a particular setting, based on extensive first-hand research'. Ethnography and 'fieldwork' vary considerably from researcher to researcher, and they also depend on the society being studied, but they often include the gamut from surveys and interviews to naturalistic observations. During recent years anthropologists themselves have begun to question the meaning of 'field' and fieldwork in what is now often called our 'postmodern' world.

Traditionally even anthropologists studying highly developed and urbanized societies have selected a remote rural community, typically a village, to do their fieldwork, but urban and multiple-method ethnography is becoming much more common. And even if anthropologists have selected a particular community as an empirical starting point, they have made use of all the data and statistics available about a country and cultural area they are trying to get a grasp of. Anthropologists are increasingly aware of the difficulties in defining the Other, the object of research. How does an anthropologist, for instance, relate to 'native' social researchers: should the anthropologist assume that he or she can outwit the native informant simply because of an outsider's view, weighed against the native's years and years of 'participant observation' and a lifelong 'field experience'? Or how should an emigrant who has returned to study his country of origin conceive of the 'native' or 'Other' in himself, as John Stewart (1989) questions in his study. Or does an American show on local television represent the 'Other' or a 'foreign' element in the everyday life of a people?

As social researchers studying our own culture and society we are quite comparable to anthropologists studying 'other' cultures. Compared with anthropologists, who often have a cultural distance that enables them to see the forest for the trees, we have the disadvantage of being insiders. That is why we have to work hard, develop theoretical perspectives and methods that will better enable us to take distance, to see the bigger picture and ourselves in it too. On the other hand, we have the advantage of a very long personal field experience. We know a lot about the culture, and we possess what Clifford Geertz (1983) calls 'local knowledge': we master in practice many of the rules and discourses we are trying to make our objects of reflection and questioning. In light of our abundant field experience, it is ridiculous to think of a media ethnography in terms of so-and-so many months of participant observation: 'fieldwork' has actually started years before we knew anything about a particular site we are going to study. Similarly, the duration of participant observation or any active part of data gathering depends on the particular study in mind.

Outlining aspects of the new agenda

Above, the retrospective story of the development of cultural media research has been told in terms of three generations of studies. The development was characterized first as a turn from the encoding/decoding model to audience ethnography and then to a discursive or constructionist view of the media and audiences. The different dimensions and implications of the new agenda are still to be explored by future research, but I suggest that we can already identify certain emergent trends in media research as implications of the discursive or constructionist turn. An increasing reflexivity, a move from audience psychology to sociology, and

a development towards addressing a whole 'media culture' instead of only mass communication are such trends, which can be identified by taking a retrospective look at the development of mass communication research. Let me now discuss these trends in the light of previous research and the chapters of this book.

Increased reflexivity

One of the gradual developments in cultural and media studies has been to reflect upon and to take distance from the cultural concerns embedded in the way we conceive of contemporary society and its characteristic new phenomena, such as mass communication and mass culture. The relation to these phenomena has been difficult in cultural studies and in critical social theory more generally, because a central objective of cultural studies has been to be critical of 'modern' or 'postmodern' society, and in that sense it itself includes a moral stance. However, to be 'critical' in the analytic sense requires that in one's perspective to the phenomena under scrutiny one is not led or blindfolded by culturally given concerns.

The Marxist background and influence of cultural studies writing and research has been evident in an interest in ideology, and in the processes through which the working class has been kept content with its social position and conditions. In particular, the Frankfurt School, and especially Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, has emphasized that commercially produced mass culture and the 'culture industry' possess a central role in this respect. Although cultural studies is particularly known for its less elitist and more complex relation to mass culture, Richard Hoggart, as an early figure, still shared many of the Frankfurt School's concerns in this respect:

> The Derby Survey suggests that fiction of one sort or another accounts for between 75 and 80 per cent of public library issues; and most librarians would say, I think, that much of this fiction is of a very poor kind. [. . .] In the public libraries the issues of the class 'history, biography, travel' form the biggest single non-fiction group, probably accounting now for a quarter to one–third of all non-fiction issues. Again, many librarians would say, I believe, that the books included in that general heading are often of little value. (Hoggart, 1958: 332–3)

In Hoggart's view, as a consequence of the consumption of 'poor fiction', the intellectual minority of the working class moves over to the middle class and the class as a whole becomes passive. Previously, Hoggart thinks, the working class read – or was offered – better popular culture, but the new mass culture is demoralizing:

> They can be accused (as can all else for which they stand as examples: the thin *bonhomie* of many television programmes, the popular film, much in commercial radio), not of failing to be highbrow, but of not being truly concrete and personal.

The quality of life, the kind of response, the rootedness in a wisdom and maturity which a popular and non-highbrow art can possess may be as valuable in their own ways as those of a highbrow art. These productions do not contribute to a sounder popular art but discourage it. (Hoggart, 1958: 339)

As said, Hoggart shares many of the Frankfurt School's views, with the exception that he does not dismiss mass culture offhand. His view does reproduce the cultural distinction between art and mass culture, but it allows the study of highbrow – as well as popular culture – products from the viewpoint of their radicalism or conservatism: whether they produce and reproduce or challenge the prevalent ideology, for instance the relations between the sexes.

It has been a central theme in cultural studies to search for possibilities of resistance in mass culture and everyday life. For instance, Janice Radway finds elements of resistance and compensation in women's reading of the Harlequin series romances:

It is combative in the sense that it enables them to refuse the other-directed social role prescribed for them by their position within the institution of marriage. In picking up a book, as they have so eloquently told us, they refuse temporarily their family's otherwise constant demand that they attend to the wants of others even as they act deliberately to do something for their own private pleasure. Their activity is compensatory, then, in that it permits them to focus on themselves and to carve out a solitary space within an arena where their self-interest is usually identified with the interests of others and where they are defined as a public resource to be mined at will by the family. For them, romance reading addresses needs created in them but not met by patriarchal institutions and engendering practices. (Radway, 1984: 211)

After the publication of some key texts, such as the book *Resistance through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson, 1976), it became extremely popular in cultural studies-influenced research to find elements of resistance in the consumption of mass cultural products or for instance in youth subcultures. Whatever researchers studied, they seemed to find symbolic resistance.

Another, related theme in cultural and media studies theorizing was the emphasis on the active role of the receiver; a theme which got one of its most influential formulations in Hall's encoding/decoding article discussed above. The point that messages have to be decoded before they could have any meaning or effect was sound, but detached from a broader theoretical context and reinterpreted in a political framework it ceased to form a basis for innovative research. John Fiske's optimism in the face of television viewer's possibilities to actively produce their readings and interpretations is often considered as an extreme example. Fiske (1987: 236) even talks about television's 'semiotic democracy', by which he refers to its delegation of production of meaning to its viewers. After such a celebration of the role of the viewer or consumer, many people in the field felt that they had had enough of it. That kind of cultural studies theorizing had come to an end.

It is important to notice that the celebration of the active viewer or of possibilities of resistance through mass culture is still fixed to the idea that the consumption of (mass) culture has to be legitimated. Reading romances or watching a television serial is granted a legitimation by showing that it is somehow valuable or useful, or at least not totally harmful. While the older highbrow/lowbrow distinction was totally based on criteria set by the cultural product, the new conception sets criteria according to the way a product is consumed. It is a move away from the sphere of aesthetics to the political, or one could say that it politicizes the aesthetics of everyday life, but it is nevertheless a reproduction of the hierarchical notion of culture.

Ien Ang has been one of the first to question this perspective on mass culture. Although she has preserved the feminist interest in looking for emancipatory potential in media reception, she also notes that the consumption of mass culture always has to do with pleasure, and that it is in no way necessary to think that pleasure has to be instrumentalized.

It seems therefore impossible to ascertain whether the pleasure of *Dallas* that is based on a recognition of and identification with the tragic structure of feeling is intrinsically progressive or conservative, and therefore politically good or bad – such a question would moreover contain an instrumentalist conception of pleasure, as though pleasure itself doesn't much matter – because that pleasure is first and foremost connected with the *fictional* nature of the position and solutions which the tragic structure of feeling constructs, not with their ideological content. (Ang, 1985: 135)

It is obvious that the instrumentalist perspective of mass communication research on its object is not of its own making; it is only echoing culturally embedded concerns about mass media. In fact, the whole of media research has been formed to address these concerns; for instance, how powerful or harmful are the effects of mass communication and its contents? There is of course really nothing wrong about addressing people's concerns with the help of systematic research, but it is also useful to ask where such concerns stem from in the culture and society. What are the main reasons for the concerns surrounding media use? What do they tell us about the way in which we conceive of the role of mass communication as part of contemporary complex societies? Whose concerns are they particularly?

Recent research shows that media use is in many ways a moral question. For instance, when talking about their TV viewing, people tend to explain, justify and excuse themselves for watching fictional programmes and particularly soap operas, whereas they may talk about watching the news and current affairs programmes as if it were a civic duty (Alasuutari, 1992; Hagen, 1992, 1994a, 1994b).

These observations at once speak to several interesting social and cultural phenomena. For one thing, the 'moral hierarchy' of television programmes shows how hierarchies are reproduced in modern societies: we all contribute to naturalizing the 'legitimate taste' (Bourdieu, 1984), especially

represented by the habits and attitudes of upper-middle-class males, by the discourses within which we talk about different genres of fact and fiction. Moreover, in so doing we reproduce a utilitarian attitude to fiction and to the media, and by preferring fact over fiction we naturalize a conventional notion of politics.

Finally, an analysis of these discourses leads us to inquire into their history and present uses in society. As the studies referred to above point out, the moral tensions surrounding our media use are not just private concerns, but instead reflect the discourses within which media policies are organized and legitimated. Public service institutions, especially in their previously common state monopoly position, utilized the notion of 'mass culture' or 'lowbrow' to legitimate the programme policy of showing what citizens *need*, instead of what they *want*. As Ien Ang puts it:

> A history of European public service broadcasting in general could be written from this perspective: a narrative in which the resistance of the audience against its objectification in the name of highminded, national cultural ideals drives the story forward. (1991: 101)

Continuing Ang's line of thought, in Chapter 6 Heikki Hellman discusses how different configurations of viewers also provide the paradigms of programming policy and the discourses by which to legitimate different programme policies. Hellman's analysis leads us to ask whether the recent problematization of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' in media research reflects, perhaps also contributes to, the international and especially European deregulation of media policy. From this perspective, the celebration of the active audience and the emancipatory potential of different programmes and genres can be seen as just another discourse useful in justifying or opposing media policies and politics.

Media researchers' increased reflexivity in relation to the discourses within which we conceive of and talk about, say, the role of the audience has meant that reception studies and qualitative audience research cannot totally ignore a media policy perspective. This also entails that the researchers have to reflect on their own position and the role of research: as researchers we cannot naively assume to hold a detached, divine position outside the society we are studying. No matter how unbiased, neutral and objective researchers want to remain, we have to acknowledge and take into account that, as soon as social science discourses about the media and audiences leave the desk of their author, they become part of public discourse used for different purposes.

We can also talk about increased reflexivity on the side of ordinary people as audiences. Or, to be more precise, it is probably a researchers' delusion to assume that people have become more reflective in their relationship to the media. It is rather that constructionist qualitative audience research, more than previous paradigms, is able to pay attention to the fact that ordinary people do not just watch TV without any

reflection on that activity as a whole. As Birgitta Höijer discusses in Chapter 9, there are also common-knowledge discourses within which to talk about, assess or criticize one's own or someone else's media use. As ordinary citizens we also share different cultural images of the media (see Chapter 5), and as Joke Hermes shows in Chapter 4, there are different discourses within which to deal with media figures and celebrities. The shared frames and discourses used in articulating issues related to the media necessarily affect our own relationship to them because, after all, reality only exists to us through meanings, discourses and discursive practices.

The discourses surrounding audiences, media and media use both form and circle around an intersection between everyday life, politics and media research. For instance, as Ingunn Hagen shows in Chapter 7 and John Tulloch in Chapter 8, television professionals – journalists, producers and drama directors – all have their images and constructs of audiences, often partly formed with the help of constructs, such as ratings figures, that media research provides them. Moreover, as John Tulloch vividly shows, national and global politics are fed in, for instance, through soap opera writers, producers or viewers suggesting social problems and political issues that could be dealt with in the series. All these different discourses and audience and media constructs become part of common knowledge, and thus affect our notions about the media and media use.

From audience psychology to sociology

The development toward a discursive or constructionist approach in media reception and qualitative audience research has also meant that researchers have taken more distance from the 'determinate moment' of decoding. A psychological interest in viewers' mental processing and interpretation of media messages has given way to a more sociological perspective, within which one studies the range of frames and discourses on the media and their contents as a topic in its own right, not as a lens through which to peek into individual acts of reception.

This increased distance taken from a psychological research interest can also be seen as a long, gradual process. With his encoding/decoding model Hall took distance from a behaviouralist theory, wherein one conceives of the process of mass communication in terms of 'effects', 'uses' or 'gratifications'. Hall points out that these concepts 'are themselves framed by structures of understanding, as well as social and economic structures which shape its "realization" at the reception end of the chain, and which permit the meanings signified in language to be transposed into conduct or consciousness' (1974: 4). Although Hall, by introducing the semiotic perspective to media reception, did break away from behaviourism, his model retained a fairly psychological aspect by suggesting that there is a

determinate moment of *reception* which one should concentrate on. This turned researchers' attention to the mental processes whereby viewers perceive and interpret messages. The underlying idea here is that, since the culture-bound concepts by which one makes sense of reality provide the horizon for interpreting new messages, the same message is not exactly the same for different individuals. As Schrøder (1987: 19), for instance, formulates the big question in a review article assessing the state of the art of audience research as it was at that time: 'Do people who watch the same programme actually see the same programme?'

The first attempts to address that question were simply based on the idea that, instead of a social survey, one needs a more qualitative approach such as 'in-depth' interviews to be able to probe into the cultural reality of a community or an individual. However, it was soon pointed out that meanings are produced in a community. It was emphasized that the individual audience member is a social being with a specific cultural identity created by the interpersonal relations of the communities to which he or she belongs. That is why it was thought that one needs to study groups, preferably natural audiences, which 'negotiate social meanings from their encounter with screen events' (Schrøder, 1987: 19).

Let us take Liebes and Katz's study of cross-cultural readings of *Dallas* (Liebes and Katz, 1990), a typical 'decoding study', as an illustrative example of the methodological problems for which 'third generation' thinking provides a new angle. From this angle, even the same empirical findings can be seen in a new light.

Liebes and Katz wanted to study how 'viewers selectively perceive, interpret and evaluate the programme in terms of local cultures and personal experiences' by studying four different groups within Israeli society (Israeli Russians, Arab citizens of Israel, Moroccan Jews, and kibbutz members who are mostly Israeli-born), second-generation Americans in Los Angeles, and Japanese in Japan (1990: 20–4). Although the research design was ambitious in trying to compare several cultures, actually there was no fieldwork, and the idea about a national and ethnic 'interpretive community' as the explanation for possible differences in 'decoding' was 'operationalized' so that the researchers asked their subject families to invite two other couples to their homes to watch a sample episode together, and to be interviewed. That was their solution to the problem that, as Katz and Liebes put it: 'We do not know how to sample thoughts without provoking them, or how to sample conversations without constructing them' (1985: 10).

The way in which Liebes and Katz present the results of their analysis shows how they conceive of the actual object of analysis. By applying Roman Jakobson's theory, they distinguish 'referential reading' and 'critical reading'. According to them, referential reading connects the programme and real life. Viewers relate to characters as real people and in turn relate these real people to their own real worlds. Meanwhile, critical reading frames discussions of the programme as a fictional construction

with aesthetic rules. Referential readings are more emotionally involving, whereas critical readings are more cognitive, since they deal with genres, dynamics of plot and thematics of the story (Liebes and Katz, 1990: 100).

To compare the different groups' 'readings', the researchers counted the ratio of referential to critical *utterances* in the group discussions. The idea was to classify 'every statement that connects an observation about the programme with an observation about real life or about the programme as text or artistic construction' (Liebes and Katz, 1990: 101). Comparisons between the groups then show that they differ significantly in the ratio of referential to critical utterances. The most critical utterances were made by the Russians, followed by Americans and kibbutzniks, followed by Moroccan Jews and Arabs. 'Higher education also increases the proportion of critical statements, but even when education is held constant, the rank order of ethnic differences remains unchanged' (Liebes and Katz, 1990: 101).

Although codes such as 'referential' and 'critical' can quite reliably be identified in interview texts, a major problem in Liebes and Katz's study is that they equate the two types of discourse with two kinds of perceiving or 'reading' *Dallas* as a programme. It is simply assumed that individuals who predominantly speak about the episode by referential utterances take the programme as real.

This hasty equation of interview talk with a decoding of a programme or with cognitive structures inherent in a culture or 'interpretive community' is challenged in present-day media research, influenced by different trends of discourse analysis. From a discourse-analytic perspective, the idea is not to treat the interviewees' talk as a screen through which to look inside their head. Instead, the idea is to start by studying the interview text – or any texts or transcriptions of conversations for that matter – in its own right. What is going on in the interview text and in the interaction situation? How do the participants (the interviewer and the interviewee) co-construct and negotiate their roles, definitions of the situation, or different objects of talk? What frames, discourses or 'interpretive repertoires' (Hermes, 1995; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) are invoked, and what functions do they serve?

This change of perspective from treating interviews as a picture of 'decoding' to treating them as discourses on the media and everyday life, a turn whose implications media researchers have only begun to chart through empirical research, was due to the ethnographic turn discussed above. Since studies such as David Morley's *Family Television* (1986) began to perceive the media from the viewpoint of the everyday, as household appliances used in different ways amidst domestic life, it was natural to start conceiving of individuals' talk on the media and their contents as just topics among other topics. The different discourses within which the media were talked about could then be seen as different uses of the media as a topic, each explainable by the context in which it is used and by the function it serves.

From this perspective, the different 'decodings' or typologies of 'reading' can be assessed in a new context. Let us take Liebes and Katz's (1990) study as an example. Continuing the central problematics of the first generation of reception studies – that is, the question about the media's ideological effects and people's oppositional potential – Liebes and Katz (1990) distinguished *referential* and *critical* readings.[3] Underlying these typologies is the researchers' interest in seeing whether viewers are critical of what they are shown, and what factors have an impact on individuals' ability to be critical. For instance, Liebes and Katz (1990: 101) explain the American *Dallas* viewers' high ratio of critical statements by them being well acquainted both with the real Dallas and with real Hollywood. However, from a discourse-analytic perspective one would ask, what are the contexts, the points people want to make in a discussion, in which people discuss the series as a performance? Or more generally, what are the themes and topics that watching and asking about *Dallas* invoke? For instance, it can be suggested that the American respondents shared the same concern with the respondents in my study (Alasuutari, 1992); when accounting for watching serials they wanted to assure the interviewer that they are not naive in their attitudes towards fictional programmes. Through their explanations and justifications people wanted to dissociate themselves from the specific kind of attitude toward television which is regarded as injurious or shameful.

From this perspective, the 'reception' of a programme or genre can be given a more sociological meaning. We are interested in it as a topic in a given society. What are the embedded problems and concerns that evoke it as a topic? What are the viewpoints and subject positions taken in the discourse? How, and by whom, is it discussed in public, and how do people in everyday-life conversations refer to or comment on the public discussions about it?

A 'reception' study devised along these lines does not necessarily analyse the programme or genre 'itself' at all. For instance, Hermes' (1995) study of women's magazine readers concentrates on the repertoires people evoke in discussing their magazine use, and in that sense defines the cultural position of that media genre. In a similar vein Gripsrud's *The Dynasty Years* (1995) treats *Dynasty* as a historical phenomenon, part of a particular period, tied to certain conjunctures in American, and more generally, Western society. Although he concentrates on a particular series, the object is not the product *Dynasty* 'as such'; rather, it is the totality of '*Dynasty* texts', the public debate and discussion developed around it in the 1980s.

Addressing media culture

All in all, the new agenda of cultural studies entails a shift to addressing media use and reception in an even broader perspective. Instead of only treating media messages from the viewpoint of their truthfulness or effects, the media and programmes and messages are also seen as part of social reality.

Life in contemporary societies increasingly revolves around the media and modern communication technologies. In fact, they are constitutive of the whole world system, where individuals and nation states are complexly dependent upon – and in a real-time connection with – each other. We more or less share the same topics world-wide, be they current events, pop stars, movies or television programmes. As a topic, there is no epistemological difference between fact and fiction, although they are framed differently in everyday conversations.

Because of the relative novelty of the contemporary 'media cultures', and the rapid development in communication technology, world cultures have to continuously renew the frames within which to conceive of the new 'mediascape' within which people lead their daily lives. Old and new epistemologies often live side by side, and rapid social change often causes confusion and fears.

As an essential aspect of contemporary cultures, the media and the frames within which they are conceived deserve critical, reflective, empirical research, and in the face of the social changes, media research also has to renew itself. For instance, the old question of whether mass communication affects its audience or whether the audiences have an active role is – within the broader societal frame – roughly the same as to ask whether society has an impact on the individual. Such questions are framed much too narrowly. As I see it, the task of the emerging new agenda of cultural audience studies is to study different phenomena related to contemporary media cultures empirically, and in such a way that researchers are not blinded by their own fears and concerns.

Organization of the book

The book at hand makes an overview of the present shape and the evolving new agenda of reception research and qualitative media studies. It is divided into two parts.

Part I discusses the development and present shape of the field at a more general level. In Chapter 2 Ann Gray discusses especially the role of feminist scholarship in the development of ethnographic research and reception research as a whole. She also discusses how the increased interest in identity politics in media studies created a partly gendered division between 'public knowledge' and 'popular culture' projects, and how the proponents of the public knowledge project, from the viewpoint of their traditional conception of politics, criticize the popular culture project for redirecting attention away from the 'real' world, without realizing how biased that perspective is. In Chapter 3 Kim Schrøder discusses the methodological development and divisions within mass communication

research. He shows how both 'camps', qualitative and quantitative research, have their weaknesses, and by giving a concrete example shows that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. They can be complementarily combined in a single study.

The chapters in Part II map out different dimensions of the new agenda. These chapters discuss how there are shared images and notions about practically all elements of mediated communication, and how these notions play a crucial role in affecting not only the media but society at large.

In Chapter 4 Joke Hermes discusses the various ways in which media figures, fictive or real-life constructions play a role in mediated communication and everyday life. In Chapter 5 I discuss different cultural images of the media. In Chapter 6 Heikki Hellman discusses how public service and commercial broadcasting policies are legitimized, and how these discourses have changed along with the recent development of the multichannel television universe.

Chapters 7–9 concentrate on the notions and constructions of the audience by different parties. In Chapter 7 Ingunn Hagen concentrates on the images various media employees, especially those of broadcasting institutions, have of audiences and the general public. In Chapter 8 John Tulloch discusses how television fiction professionals' knowledge and conceptions of a targeted audience and its taste are taken into account already in programme production. In Chapter 9 Birgitta Höijer discusses the viewers' notions, or 'meta-cognitions', of the audience.

The last word is given to David Morley. As an active and prominent figure in reception and audience studies through all its phases, Morley gives his assessment of the 'third generation' of reception research in the light of the chapters in this book.

Notes

1. More precisely, that paradigm can be dated back to 1969, when Hans Robert Jauss published his essay Paradigmawechsel in der Literaturwissenschaft'. In that essay, Jauss himself characterizes the ideas he presents as a paradigm shift in literary criticism, and he was not mistaken in that. Instead of studying authors' biographies, German literary critics began to study the social conditions accounting for the reception of a work (Holub, 1984).

2. It was the second part of a research project which started with Brunsdon and Morley's (1978) analysis of the Nationwide programme itself.

3. In that their classification is close to Hall's typology distinguishing between dominant and oppositional codes. Similarly Richardson and Corner (1986) made a distinction between transparent and mediated descriptions.

References

Alasuutari, P. (1992) "I'm Ashamed to Admit it but I Have Watched *Dallas*": The Moral Hierarchy of TV Programmes', *Media, Culture & Society*, 14 (4): 561–82.

Allor, M. (1988) 'Relocating the Site of the Audience', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 5: 217–33.

Ang, I. (1985) *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, London: Methuen.

Ang, I. (1989) 'Beyond Self-Reflexivity', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 13 (2): 27–9.

Ang, I. (1990) 'Culture and Communication: Towards an Ethnographic Critique of Media Consumption in the Transnational Media System'. *European Journal of Communication*, 5: 239–60.

Ang, I. (1991) *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brunsdon, C. and Morley, D. (1978) *Everyday Television: 'Nationwide'*. London: British Film Institute.

Drotner, K. (1992) 'What is "the Everyday" in Media Ethnography?' Paper presented to the Mass Media and the Ethnography of Everyday Life seminar, Holbaek, Denmark, November.

Fish, S. (1979) *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Fiske, J. (1987) *Television Culture*. London: Methuen.

Fiske, J. (1988) 'Meaningful Moments', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 5: 246–51.

Fiske, J. (1990) 'Ethnosemiotics: Some Personal and Theoretical Reflections', *Cultural Studies*, 4 (1): 85–99.

Fiske, J. (1993) 'Audiencing: Cultural Practice and Cultural Studies', in Norman Denzin (ed.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage: 189–98.

Geertz, C. (1983) *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.

Gerbner, G. (1956) 'Towards a General Model of Communication', *Audio Visual Communication Review*, IV (3): 171–99.

Gray, A. (1992) *Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Leisure Technology*. London: Routledge.

Gripsrud, J. (1995) *The Dynasty Years: Hollywood Television and Critical Media Studies*. London: Routledge.

Grossberg, L. (1988) 'Wandering Audiences, Nomadic Critics', *Cultural Studies*, 2 (3): 377–92.

Gupta, A. and Ferguson, J. (eds) (1997) *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hagen, I. (1992) *News Viewing Ideals and Everyday Practices: The Ambivalences of Watching Dagsrevyen*. University of Bergen, Department of Mass Communication, Report No. 15.

Hagen, I. (1994a) 'The Ambivalences of TV News Viewing: Between Ideals and Everyday Practices', *European Journal of Communication*, 9: 193–220.

Hagen, I. (1994b) 'Expectations and Consumptions Patterns in TV News Viewing', *Media, Culture & Society*, 16: 415–28.

Hall, S. (1974) *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Stencilled Occasional Paper No. 7. Birmingham: University of Birmingham.

Hall, S. and Jefferson, T. (eds) (1976) *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. London: Hutchinson.

Hermes, J. (1995) *Reading Women's Magazines: An Analysis of Everyday Media Use*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hobson, D. (1982) *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*. London: Methuen.

Hoggart, R. (1958) *The Uses of Literacy*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Holub, R. (1984) *Reception Theory – A Critical Introduction*. London: Methuen.

Jauss, H. (1969) *Paradigmawechsel in der Literaturwissenschaft*. Linguistische Berichte, No. 3, 44–56.

Jensen, K. B. (1990) 'Television Futures: A Social Action Methodology for Studying Interpretive Communities', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 7 (2): 1–18.

Katz, E. and Liebes, T. (1984) 'Once upon a Time, in Dallas', *Intermedia*, 12: 28–32.

Katz, E. and Liebes, T. (1985) *The Export of Meaning: Cross Cultural Readings of American TV*. Paper presented to the Manchester Symposium on Broadcasting, March.

Lasswell, H.D. (1948) 'The Structure and Function of Communication in Society', in L. Bryson (ed.), *The Communication of Ideas*. New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies.

Liebes, T. (1984) 'Ethnocriticism: Israelis of Moroccan Ethnicity Negotiate the Meaning of Dallas', *Studies in Visual Communication*, 10 (3): 46–72.

Liebes, T. and Katz, E. (1990) *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lull, J. (1980a) 'The Social Uses of Television', *Human Communication Research*, 6: 197–209.

Lull, J. (1980b) 'Family Communication Patterns and the Social Uses of Television', *Communication Research*, 7 (3): 319–34.

Lull, J. (1988) 'The Audience as Nuisance', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 5: 239–42.

Malinowski, B. (1961 [1922]) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York: E.P. Dutton.

Morley, D. (1980) *The Nationwide Audience*. London: British Film Institute.

Morley, D. (1986) *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*. London: Comedia.

Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*. London: Sage.

Radway, J.A. (1984) *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Radway, J.A. (1988) 'Reception Study: Ethnography and the Problems of Dispersed Audiences and Nomadic Subjects', *Cultural Studies*, 2 (3): 359–76.

Richardson, K. and Corner, J. (1986) 'Reading Reception: Mediation and Transparency in Viewers' Accounts of a TV Programme', *Media, Culture & Society*, 8: 485–508.

Schrøder, K.C. (1987) 'Convergence of Antagonistic Traditions? The Case of Audience Research'. *European Journal of Communication*, 2: 7–31.

Schrøder, K.C. (1994) 'Audience Semiotics, Interpretive Communities and the "Ethnographic Turn" in Media Research', *Media, Culture & Society*, 16: 337–47.

Shannon, C.E. and Weaver, W. (1963) *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Silverstone, R. (1991) 'From Audiences to Consumers: The Household and the Consumption of Communication and Information Technologies', *European Journal of Communication*, 6: 135–54.

Silverstone, R., Hirsch, E. and Morley, D. (1991) 'Listening to a Long Conversation: An Ethnographic Approach to the Study on Information and Communication Technologies in the Home', *Cultural Studies*, 5 (2): 204–27.

Stewart, J.O. (1989) *Drinkers, Drummers, and Decent Folk: Ethnographic Narratives of Village Trinidad*, New York: State University of New York Press.