

Ny litteratur

Ingegerd Rydin:
**Making Sense of TV-Narratives:
Children's Readings of a Fairy Tale**
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Narrative represents a central means by which we explain the world to ourselves, a means by which we organise our memories and expectations and by which we construct our identities through common frames of reference. It is also, therefore, central to the ways that generations pass down wisdom and understanding to the next generation. George Gerbner once remarked that in the second half of the twentieth century, television tells 'most of the stories to most of the people most of the time' (Gerbner, et al., 1986, p.18), making narratives told and retold through the mass media central to contemporary processes of socialisation and hence thoroughly embedded in the lives of both children and their parents. In this article I review Rydin's recent dissertation, *Making Sense of TV-Narratives* (Rydin, 1996), which explores the implications of the fact that for today's children, narratives are to a great extent located on television. Yet such narratives are not always invented for television, but rather television draws on, and refers to, other forms of story telling, as indeed does the child audience when making sense of, and retelling, television narratives.

When narrative moves from oral culture and print culture to television, it becomes significantly transformed in the process. Television represents narrative simultaneously through words and pictures; it presents its stories at a standard pace irrespective of the actual attention or comprehension of its audience; in contrast to print narration, television tends to miss out many of the links – the causal relations – which spell out the connections between event sequences; it also tends to omit, or transform,

the rhetorical or persuasive address which convinces the audience to attend and stay with the story.

In terms of the typical viewing practices which have evolved around television, the routine domestic contextualisation of television adds two important features which further differentiate television from books or verbal storytelling, especially for young children. First, as viewing practices often involve just the child in front of the set, other adults (previously the story teller or story reader) are no longer present and the child is alone with the narrative. Second, the television must present its narrative to an unknown audience, for it has little idea who is actually watching in terms of age, gender, class, or even interests and motivation, and consequently it cannot easily tailor its communication to its listener. We know from research that young children frequently watch programmes intended for older children, and girls frequently watch programmes intended for boys, although interestingly not vice versa in either case (Kinder, 1991) How then do children understand television narration compared with oral or print narration?

Before considering this question we should note that television narration has evolved a series of televisual conventions in order to circumvent these problems where possible. Thus, television works to create an alternative, parasocial interaction (though TV hosts, links-persons etc) to the once-present story teller. It also bombards the child with an audio-visual experience in which images, sounds, speed, and vividness compensate for a more child-centred pace and mode of address. The reception context also may provide further means to overcome these problems. Children often prefer to watch favourite shows on video, where repetition through constant replaying is a key part of the experience. Likewise parents may try to mediate between the child and the television. Thus both text and reception contexts provide a set of resources with which those difficulties which arise for chil-

dren from the historical shift from face-to-face or print to televisual story-teller may be resolved. In this context research must ask what children make of television narratives, what they get out of them, what they bring to them, and how are these narratives organised so as to communicate effectively, if indeed they do, with the child audience which they never meet.

Reception Studies – Achievements and Problems

Before considering how Rydin's work addresses these and related questions, I would like to contextualise her project within its main intellectual domain, that of reception studies. In relation to a broad range of media forms, this research domain integrates sociological and literary approaches to ask: how do people make sense of mediated texts; how do texts invite or expect certain kinds of audience knowledge and hence audience readings; how, as a result of the dynamic process of the text-reader negotiation, do certain meanings emerge as part of specific located social practices; and how are audiences or readers positioned in relation to processes of cultural construction as a result?

The story of reception studies is an interdisciplinary and multinational story with what Rob Farr has said of social psychology (1991), namely a short history but a long past. The history is now being retold with rather a British slant, as stemming more from cultural studies than from its interdisciplinary engagement with social psychology, anthropology and literary studies, and somewhat to the neglect of American, North European, Australian and Scandinavian versions, all of which diverge in interesting ways (Livingstone, 1998a) The past, of course, is even more negotiable, and part of the interest of Rydin's dissertation is that a broader range of theoretical perspectives are brought to bear on an empirical reception project than are often drawn upon in the research literature.

However, to contextualise, this particular reception research, I would briefly tell the history thus. As Stuart Hall noted in 1980, "a new and exciting phase in so-called audience research" (p.131) has opened up the interpretive analysis of audience reception. For a time this generated some of the most exciting, stimulating and most interdisciplinary work being done in the field of media and communications. The excitement was due to the apparently simultaneous convergence on a common set of arguments across a variety of theoretical traditions. For uses and gratifications researchers, this new focus offered a route 'to build the bridge we have been hoping might arise between gratifications studies

and cultural studies' (Katz, 1979, p.75) For critical mass communications research, with its focus on the ideological power and institutional production of texts, it offered the opportunity to reconsider the hitherto underestimated interpretative activity of the audience (Fejes, 1984) For literary theorists, it offered a non-elitist and interactionist means of analysing popular as well as high culture (e.g. Radway, 1984) For cultural studies, Hall's encoding/decoding model proposed an empirical project examining how "the degrees of 'understanding' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange – depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the 'personifications', encoder-producer and decoder/receiver" (1980, p.131)

It may be useful here to note the achievements of this new research field, for the original agenda for audience research has been successful. We have moved on, conclusively, from the problematic old arguments – the semiotics of fixed and given textual meanings; the assertion of linear, causal effects on passive audience (and the simplified accounts of the audience in both uses and gratifications and cultural imperialism theories); the homogenous, mass 'audience'. We have established that audiences are plural in their decodings, that their cultural context matters, that they do not always agree with textual analysis, etc. Most significantly, research has made visible an audience which has hitherto been devalued, marginalised and presumed about in both policy and theory. This argument has been most strongly advanced in relation to the television audience, perhaps because television, the key medium of the twentieth century, came to dominate over the same period as the establishment and funding of empirical research and so has been studied extensively by both social science and critical/humanities researchers, but similar developments are now occurring in relation to other media.

Audience reception analysis has not gone uncriticised, however, and the nature of the criticisms indicate some of the challenges which lie ahead for future research (Livingstone, 1998b) Relatively little attention has been given to addressing and resolving the accumulating body of critiques. The active audience, negotiation of meaning, oppositional subcultures, resistance, even the notion of audience itself; all these have become subject to a significant set of critiques.

One critique involves the extent to which audiences are free to interpret texts in different ways, suggesting that where once the audience was thought in danger of disappearing, it is now the text which is in danger. Hence, Blumler et al (1985) are concerned with excessive or 'vulgar gratification-

ism', while Fiske rather controversially coined the phrase of 'semiotic democracy' (1987) Secondly, and in contradiction with the first criticism, there is concern that the interactive emphasis of the text-reader metaphor does not stand up to scrutiny insofar as it tends to collapse back into a claim for textual determination, reducing back to a transmission model of communication (e.g. Lewis, 1991)

The significance of how diverse interpretations are, and what determines them, is the focus of the third category of criticism. The 'so what' question has mainly been raised in relation to the relation between active audiences and political or ideological processes, insofar as activity has been frequently understood as opposition, subversion or resistance. But more generally one can ask how the interpretation of television as text can be brought together with the domestic consumption of television as product within a theory of everyday life? And fourthly, the politics of audience research is debated not only in terms of the theoretical significance of audience activity but also in terms of methodology. What kinds of data should we be seeking, what are the problems in establishing its reliability and validity, how far are qualitative methods to be preferred, and what should be the relation between the researcher and the researched?

Children's Reception of Television Narratives

Within her reception project Ingegerd Rydin addresses several of these criticisms, thereby providing a valuable instance of how they may be dealt with in future research. In her analysis of children's interpretations of a televised fairy tale, she maintains a firm hold on the complex structures of the televised fairy tale as text and explores the subtle and diverse ways in which children negotiate these to find a meaningful connection between themselves as gendered and culturally located viewers and the fairy tale itself. While retaining this interactive relationship at the centre of her argumentation – for it was this mutuality of text and reader which formed the motivating centrepiece of the new reception studies – Rydin also contextualises this process within the specific socialisation processes (home, school, culture) of the children's daily lives. The subtleties of children's making sense of television are uncovered through detailed and sensitive individual interviews following viewing, modelled on Piaget's 'methode clinique' – child-centred, open-ended interviews, but directed towards a focussed consideration of the multiple levels at which the televised fairy tale works.

Both her methodological approach and the ways in which she draws on, and weaves together, a diverse range of theory are especially welcome in relation to child audiences within media research. While the excitement over audience reception research in the 1980s depended significantly on the convergence of multiple research paths, drawing upon multiple intellectual traditions, these are in danger of becoming reduced through a kind of canonical retelling of the field's history, thus neglecting the richness from which new vitality might grow. In this context, it is indeed refreshing to see how Rydin draws, in a lucid and well-argued fashion, on Piaget and Vygotsky to understand child development, on Barthes and Propp for the analysis of narrative, on Bettelheim's illuminating account of the importance for children of fairy tales, on Bakhtin's dialogic approach to the construction of meaning as a social practice, and on Bourdieu's theorisation of such practices within the social and cultural formations which constitute their material context.

I think it would be fair to say that while the child audience has, of all media research, been the most heavily studied, the least illumination has resulted from this tradition. As Hodge and Tripp argued, we 'have been trying to answer the wrong questions in the wrong order, with theories and methods that have been overly partial and inadequate (and generating) remarkably inconclusive and contradictory results' (1986) This is largely because research has been, in the main, pragmatically directed towards the agendas produced by the moral panics which have attended the introduction of each new medium over the course of the twentieth century (Drotner, 1992) Thus the questions have concerned the effects of television – typically short-term, harmful, behavioural effects – and it has been the most administratively oriented, the most functionalist, domain within audience research. Both the conception of the child and of the medium – particularly the television programme – have been restricted, and have only belatedly drawn on the developments in adult audience reception studies to which I referred earlier.

Indeed, not only has there been insufficient integration between the literature on child and on adult audiences, but there has also been a problematic separation between what might be termed the child-centred approach and the media-centred approach to the field. The child-centred approach, in trying to understand how the media affect existing child development theories and family systems, has tended to be naive about the distinct forms and significations of different media and media contents, while the media-centred approach, in trying to understand

how children in particular fit into general theories of audiences and media systems, has tended to lack, or reinvent, a theory of child development. Very little research integrates a complex account of children's cognitive, emotional and social development, across the age range from infancy to adulthood, with an analysis of children and young people's relation to the media (themselves an increasingly diverse array of technologies and contents)

However, since the mid 1980s a small number of projects began to ask how children responded not just to brief and often artificial 'stimuli', but to programmes conceived as texts. Developmental psychology began to be integrated with cultural and literary approaches to texts. And some of the most interesting work on children and media emerged as a result (Buckingham, 1993; Davies, 1989; Hodge and Tripp, 1986; Noble, 1975; Palmer, 1986) This dissertation thus furthers this still small but significant tradition of work.

Rydin's dissertation invites us to regard television primarily as an aesthetic medium, as text, with television narratives relying on conventions of characterisation, plot, genre, and so forth. Such complexity requires close reading of the text, and Rydin interrelates two kinds of reading – her own, as informed by theories of text, especially narrative, to understand the encoding that is presented to the audience, – and, occupying the bulk of the dissertation, the plural decodings of the text by a group of 86 children, girls and boys, from a diversity of social class backgrounds, aged 6 and 8 years old (i.e. in the Swedish context, children with experience of preschool and formal schooling respectively).

The text she selected for investigation she labelled 'A Suburban Sleeping Beauty', a version of the classic fairy tale updated by television to a realistic suburban setting but conforming to the formal features of fairy tales. It consists of five episodes, and we need to know these to understand the children's responses. Thus, to tell the story very briefly indeed, first we see a couple who long for a child but cannot conceive. Second, the couple adopt a baby and are clearly happy. Third, the mother's evil friend visits the baby with her cat, the baby then suffers an asthma attack, and the friend utters a curse to the effect that the baby will not survive past her seventh birthday. Fourth, some years have passed and, at the seventh birthday party, the girl finds the evil friend's cat in her car and faints as if dead. Fifth and last, after several days of gloom, a neighbouring boy finds his way into the sad house and wakes up the girl with his funny faces. Thus the story ends happily.

In her interviews, Rydin invited the children individually to retell the story after viewing, and then

prompted a more detailed retelling from them. The structure of the interview pursued the children's responses to a range of textual features, invited them to draw a picture, and asked also about their cultural habits and experiences more generally. Among the many interesting and detailed observations and interpretations, the main findings can be outlined as follows.

First, concerning narrative coherence (the syntagmatic dimension of the text), Rydin argues that there is an important parallel between the causal sequencing of the text and the cognitive structures, or story grammar, by which audiences understand the text. Through these parallel structures, events may be organized, inferences made, predictions generated, sequences remembered, and conclusions (or morals) drawn (see also Collins, 1983) Rydin found that the 6 year olds were particularly poor at presenting a coherent description of the five episodes; instead they tended to focus on just one or two of the later episodes which, presumably, they found more interesting. The older children were more likely to present a 'good story', with a beginning, middle and ending, as were the girls, with the boys tending to omit the first two episodes in particular. However, when more explicitly guided towards a reconstruction of the story, the younger children appeared to have attended to the story almost as well as the older children, suggesting that age differences reflect socialisation into proper storytelling rather than underlying differences in understanding. Interestingly though, despite guidance, the younger children remained unlikely to include the evil friend's curse, arguably the key to the magical, and the causal or motivational, structure of the narrative.

Second, concerning narrative codes (the paradigmatic dimension of the text), Rydin's analysis raises many points of interest which complement the analysis of narrative coherence. In brief, it appears that older children more than younger children have been socialised into decoding the stereotypes by which, for example, white appearance symbolises a good character while black means evil. Similarly, their interpretations of the nonverbal gestures of the characters were more subtle, while the boys especially found it difficult to provide the appropriate psychological interpretations of the actions (for example, that the evil friend was jealous of the couple's new baby) While girls were better at decoding the underlying motives, Rydin suggests that the boys showed more media literacy, being more likely to recognise the cinematic codes and intertextual references which distinguish the programme as 'pretend' rather than 'real'.

Third, through her analysis of the children's drawings, Rydin adds an emphasis on the visual to a

literature which has hitherto been rather restricted to the verbal aspects of encoding and decoding. Children's drawings are themselves decoded as indicative of cultural assumptions and, particularly, of the subject positioning of the children within their culture. They were found to emphasise or ignore certain characters or characteristics in their drawings in ways which complemented the verbal analysis of the narrative. The most salient aspect of this analysis was the importance of identification, and with it the dimension of gender rather than age, as girls tended to draw female figures (for which they had a choice) while boys tended to upgrade the importance of the secondary male figures in the narrative, putting them in the centre of their drawings.

Finally, the dissertation attempts to contextualise the reception process by uncovering children's sociocultural backgrounds through an analysis of their cultural capital – the culturally inherited assumptions about narration and knowledge which inform our interpretations of both mediated and nonmediated texts (Bourdieu, 1984). Focussing on the ways in which children's experience or lack of experience with culturally valued books affected their narrative competence, Rydin found a clear link which showed that those children who had been socialised into the legitimate culture of book narratives produced more coherence narrations of the *Suburban Sleeping Beauty*, for they had learned the cultural codes and norms for storytelling. In some ways, an immersion in television stories could compensate for a lack of books in the home, while the most fragmentary narratives were told by children who lacked experience with both books and television.

Critical Commentary

Rydin's dissertation raises a number of issues facing audience reception studies. First, the choice of a case study as a method for reception analysis is problematic, if commonplace. Rydin claims that 'it is assumed that children's reception of a specific program that is based on a universal fictional theme or myth can provide insights into more general interpretative processes' (1996). Yet such assumptions are not straightforward, and audience research now abounds with often contradictory claims (for example, about the presence of absence of gender differences in reception, or about children's comprehension and response at different ages, or about the openness of different genres). Qualitative researchers are usually scrupulous about disavowing claims to generalisability, but at the point of writing audience theory, or of drawing conclusions across a number of studies, the specificity of responses to particular programmes or genres by audience

groups of a particular composition, is easily lost and grander empirical claims find their way into the secondary literature. To develop this point in relation to Rydin's research, we may wonder whether it was appropriate to choose just one story, which was 'biased' towards girls (in terms of the central characters and the romantic plot)? For on the basis of this narrative, boys appeared more likely to ignore both story setting and character motivation in their retelling. They also appeared more media literate, for they strive to make the story relevant to them by drawing on intertextual references from 'their' media. The comparison with a more action-oriented story with more male characters (– indeed, this would be more typical of television narratives) would clarify – or could still clarify – the nature of the gender differences in orientation to narration claimed here. As girls often watch 'boys' narratives but boys tend to avoid 'girls' narratives, one might argue that in this research the boys were asked to do something relatively unusual.

A second question about the relation between theory and data in reception studies, and again one which is particularly pertinent for qualitative research, concerns the decision to conduct inductive versus hypothesis-testing research. Qualitative research tends to emphasise an inductive research strategy (Jensen and Jankowski, 1991) in order to be sensitive to the structure inherent in the data, to avoid the imposition of theory-driven or misleading assumptions onto the data, etc. But as a body of qualitative audience research builds up, one might ask whether such a strategy also tends to invite the reinvention of the wheel rather than the development of ideas across research programmes. Again to take an example from Rydin's research, one wonders whether the finding that boys appear more media literate, more critical in their response to the narrative shown, yet also poorer at retelling the episodes they saw, was itself predictable? Does past research on media literacy or on gender differences in narrative comprehension (whether from media research or social psychology) lead us to anticipate such differences? And if it did, does such research also suggest that specific distinctions, or specific avenues of questioning, might be worth pursuing, in which case subsequent research should build on previous research. One such case where this is clearly the case relates to the distinction between fantasy and reality: Rydin divides children's responses into 'real', 'ambiguous' or 'pretend', and as an account of what they said, this seems fair enough. But given the distinctions already debated in the literature – such as Ang's (1985) emotional realism versus literal realism,¹ or Liebes and Katz' (1990) critical and referential readings, or Dorr's

(1986) distinction between the (im)possible and the (im)probable – there is surely a challenge for qualitative research in which separate projects, or case studies, should be integrated.

One theoretical frame for interpreting these reception data cannot be ignored, namely that of age. When audience researchers trace the shifts in understanding or perspective on a text from one age to another, we must ask how age is being theorised. A Piagetian approach is widely criticised as too individualistic, too rigidly wedded to a normative theory of invariant stages, too universalistic in its claims. Yet a purely social account – stressing instead the shifting cultural contexts which frame reception, from the home to pre-school to school – tends to overstate the case for cultural variation and similarly can become normative in its assumption of an age progression. Hodge and Tripp (1986), perhaps the best-known study in this area, attempted to integrate a Piagetian account of child development with a semiotic analysis of texts, yet this Piagetian influence is rarely flagged up in secondary reporting of their study. Indeed, most studies of children's reception of the media underplay the meaning of a child's age, preferring to argue against public, or academic, assumptions about what children supposedly cannot do, or are not ready for, by a certain age (– rather than explaining what they can do and how this alters with age). Children, it is often claimed by communication scholars, are more sophisticated than we give them credit for – fine, but how then shall we make distinctions between the toddler and the teenager?

Rydin relies on Vygotsky's approach to child development – an appropriate choice, for Vygotsky adds a necessary social constructionist angle to an otherwise cognitive developmental account. Thus, as part of the 'children are sophisticated' argument, she shows how careful questioning, and guided recall, can make apparent age differences in reception disappear. The importance of sensitive interviewing is well established, but is the claim that even more sensitive interviewing would eliminate all age differences? Interestingly, it appears more difficult to make the positive case for qualitative differences between children of different age groups, and while Vygotsky offers some useful concepts, such as that of the Zone of Proximal Development – the point at which the child is responsive to new ideas but cannot yet articulate them – his theory is not easy to apply in the field of audience reception. While we can agree that 'the younger child thinks in a different way because her conceptual understanding of the world is different' (Rydin, 1996), it is not clear that the younger children, and those children lacking cultural capital, really told qualitatively differ-

ent stories, nor what kinds of qualitative differences the theory might lead us to expect (and how these might be different from the age differences observed by more cognitive researchers such as Collins, 1983, or Dorr, 1986)

Where does all this leave the notion of the active viewer? Rydin presents her findings as supporting the notion of the active viewer – for children are shown to draw upon interpretative repertoires to decode the narrative in different ways. But as commentators have observed, there is a confusion between 'activity' as social construction and 'activity' as politically resistant (Livingstone, 1998a), and Rydin's findings also show how girls and boys, middle and working class children, all do what is expected of them, perpetuating social differences and traditional educational inequalities. Thus the findings may be seen to support the notion of the passive viewer – an actively interpretative process by which predictable outcomes which reproduce hegemony are achieved? Essentially, if normative culture is engraved in the interpretative discourses of the audience, where lies the agency of the viewer?²

Final Remarks

Clearly, research has only begun to understand how children make sense of television narratives. We still have to work out what theories of child development and socialisation are appropriate, what kinds of meanings and knowledge are being generated through these processes of interpretation, and what kinds of methods should be used to investigate what is, in many ways, an invisible process. Some of the critical points I have raised regarding this dissertation reflect the difficulties of establishing new ways of working with new research questions. Other criticisms points can be levelled at any research project, for they really reflect a desire to see more work along the same lines, looking at other kinds of television programmes, with other ages of children, and so forth. When more work like this has been conducted, we will be able to draw firmer conclusions. Yet Ingegerd Rydin has taken this process forward through her integration of theoretical perspectives relating to both television texts and child audiences, and through her sensitive and thought-provoking application of these to the empirical analysis of children's reception of a television fairy tale. She makes a good case for the use of qualitative in-depth methods, for the combined focus on age, gender and social class, and for the integration of multilayered textual analysis with audience interpretations. While her specific findings raise many questions for the future, her dissertation also provides an excellent and much needed model for research in this area.

Notes

1. For example, rather than characterising girls as less media literate because they appear more involved in the television narrative, while boys appear more media literate, more distanced, because they label the show 'pretend' rather than 'real', one wonders whether girls use emotional realism, and boys use literal realism, to orient themselves to the show, rendering their answers to questions of what's real or pretend in need of further interpretation.
2. One methodology for pursuing this question would be the search for interpretative contradictions within or between classes and genders, above and beyond evidence which supports the familiar differences.

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