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What is This?

Sleeping with the enemy: Audience studies and critical literacy

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Abstract
Audience studies is not the vibrant field it was in its 1980s and early 1990s heyday. Cultural studies today has a more balanced interest in production, audiences and texts. A renewed focus in audience studies on everyday meaning production, identity and relations of power could benefit from recent developments. Theorization of power especially has benefited from recent work on governmentality. In accord with recent work on 'affect', there is an opportunity for renewed vitality and urgency. Was audience studies damaged beyond repair by the charge that it is a populist field that celebrates rather than interrogates everyday media culture? Could a concept such as cultural literacy provide a bridge to help re-establish the critical credibility of audience studies or would it burden this field with its implied notions of standards, distinction and cultural exclusion? The article discusses recent work with youth audiences to inquire into the possibilities of 'critical literacy'. It proposes taking up questions and insights raised by affect theory, to merge appreciation, criticism and understanding of the forces that drive (the possibility of) change, and to embed critical literacy in cultural studies' ongoing interest in the construction of (cultural) citizenship.

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Could critical literacy provide a useful change of perspective in engaging with everyday practices of meaning-making in relation to the media? Would it help or hinder the goals of what in its earlier years was called 'the new audience research'? Literacy relates to democracy, emancipation and empowerment, building aware and critical openness towards forms of government, all of which are important themes in media research. Luke (2000: 448) defines literacy teaching as:

> building access to literate practices and discourse resources, setting enabling pedagogic conditions for students to use their existing and new discourse resources for social exchange in the social fields where texts and discourses matter. These constitute the social semiotic 'tool kit' that one puts to work in educational, occupational and civic life.

Teaching media literacy, if not critical literacy, has been on the agenda of governments and non-governmental organizations alike across the western world (and perhaps elsewhere as well) (Buckingham, 2005; Livingstone et al., 2005; Penman and Turnbull, 2007; Raad voor Cultuur, 2005). A shared sense that current levels of literacy are inadequate in today's media-saturated world turns unexpected parties across the political spectrum into bedfellows.

A similar type of urgency is hard to find in audience studies today (although there are exceptions, such as Herbert and Gillespie, 2011). The question here will be whether audience studies should engage more fully with issues of literacy in order to reconnect with critical media studies and cultural studies. The relation between audience studies, media studies and cultural studies requires some historical context. For a decade and a half (1980s to mid 1990s) audience studies were a strong means for cultural studies to address issues of power relations and everyday meaning production. Qualitative audience research served the purpose of emancipation: it gave ordinary people a voice. It intervened in broader social discussion of the value(s) of culture by arguing that popular culture was a field of struggle in which ultimately the dominance of cultural and economic elites was assured. The extraordinary energy created in this debate dissolved in a broad discussion of postmodernism during the 1990s. While popular culture for a brief period had been a real point of contention, by the end of the 1990s the failure of social democratic policy and migration were the issues that mattered.

Audience studies, meanwhile, moved into 'normal science' mode and away from cultural studies into a more vaguely defined field in between cultural studies, critical media studies and communication science. Reproached for uncritically celebrating popular culture, it lacked the organization, the status or the (disciplinary) position to counter this criticism. As popular culture had also ceased being a contentious issue, audience studies was left in an awkward situation. It needed and needs refocusing, both conceptually and, in a sense, politically. Insofar as those of us practising audience studies feel it can still be a good means to do cultural studies as an engaged form of theoretical and empirical academic work, audience studies needs to connect with today's issues and struggles. (Critical) literacy could possibly provide that link.

There are arguments that count against taking up the debate around literacy or critical literacy as a concept. Literacy is historically intimately connected with elite culture and extended schooling. The very discussion of literacy, and especially media literacy, that

could help audience studies re-find a critical edge and broader purchase, is cast in terms of concern over the possible effects of the media, especially on children and young people. Although concern is not in itself bad, it can hinder the concerned observer in understanding that the media's potential victims may well have their own ways of dealing with 'dangerous' popular fare. My observations here follow in the footsteps of Buckingham's (1993) research on children watching television; Buckingham put forward exactly this argument and grounded it in empirical research in this and later work (e.g. Buckingham, 2000, to name just one). My goal will be the somewhat broader one of reconnecting audience studies to cultural studies by engaging with both literacy and affect.

The overlapping areas of concern over the possible effects on (young) media audiences and theoretical understanding of how we use and invest in the media socially make for a perfect testing ground for the 'uses' of critical literacy. The concept could strengthen the type of critical, well-theorized audience studies that we see fairly little of, which balance criticism and appreciation of the media, and connect them to what Grossberg would call 'the present conjuncture' (2010: 40–1). They could be signposted as 'post-populist' and, at the same time, cater to the old project of the emancipation of everyday media use. They would be geared towards understanding the present in such a way that the possibility of change is part of the stories they tell (again following Grossberg [2010: 54–5] on the goals of cultural studies). For a start, let's take a look at literacy in everyday life and chart the possibilities for common ground in the projects of critical literacy and cultural studies' audience research. The overriding goal is to create a position that allows the cultural studies researcher to be critical of social power relations and popular media genres without conflating audiences and texts, or understanding the political importance of taste, reading or political preferences as prescriptive or given and closed to debate and discussion.

Audience studies and the media landscape today

The most recent work in audience studies provides us with a second and altogether different reason to inquire into the possible uses of 'critical literacy' as a game-changer concept. The logic of governmentality studies informs this recent work: it paints a bleak picture of what we make of our audiencehood. The reality TV viewers described by Teurlings (2010), using Andrejevic's (2004) concept of 'media-savvyness', combine their literacy with critical apathy. Their insight into media production is a dead-end street that, at best, allows them to feel superior to other viewers (who might feel the same way). It does not in any way encourage viewers to further reflect on television, television production or media culture. Knowledge in itself is not literacy, nor does it lead to critical engagement. 'Media-savvyness' is not Luke's toolkit that can be put to use in occupational or civic life. Neither does critical apathy answer the older audience studies question of how television is meaningful, how it strengthens or questions a viewer's sense of identity.

While literacy itself is not an innocent term, it could be a helpful tool to make clear how, as audience members, we are woven into webs of knowledge, power and affect that render us ineffectual as social beings and as citizens. In order to establish whether 'literacy' is a useful term, the table needs to be cleared: what exactly was the problem 'celebrating popular culture' in earlier cultural studies audience research on the one hand,

and is there, on the other, another way of understanding and defining literacy, that does not re-establish standards, paternalist concern and condescension towards less-educated audiences or popular media texts? While literacy is no help in defending popular culture (popular culture does not automatically 'activate' audiences), it may be useful in distinguishing the analytical from the affective sides of processes of meaning-making.

Cultural studies' early interest in audiences tried to do just that. A bird's-eye view of said history could start with Raymond Williams' notion of mobile privatization and his own experiences of watching television in the United States (Williams, 1974). Whereas television did – in a revolutionary way – alter the relationship of the viewer to the world, and brings it to audiences wherever they are, in the privacy of their own lifeworld, it did so, in Williams' account, in a way that requires skills and knowledge to understand it. The flow of intermingled programming, commercials, announcements and previews only makes sense to those trained to watch it. A strong interest in media audiences more generally followed from the early 1980s onwards. It is customary to quote the seminal work of Stuart Hall and his ground-breaking 'Encoding-decoding' paper (1980), as well as Dave Morley's (1980, 1986), Ien Ang's (1985) and Janice Radway's (1987) work on audience interpretation of a current affairs programme, an American prime-time soap opera and romance novels respectively. There was also a more generalized cultural-political interest in audiences that saw them as an unrecognized political avant-garde, that resisted the dominant order. John Fiske has borne the brunt of the criticism of overly celebrating everyday media use that followed. He is criticized for starting a type of studies that all seemed to be written in the same mould. Morris (1988) spoke of 'ventriloquism': critical intellectuals understood themselves as mouthpieces for ordinary people, who, apparently, were empowered by their everyday media use rather than oppressed by being folded into the dominant order. The reproach of populism is often taken to refer to all audience studies from that period, which does not do justice to individual authors or their work. Jenkins' (1992) study of *Star Trek* fans, or 'Trekkies', for example, opened up an entire new field of research that was respectful to audience practice, sought to address the power relations that co-created particular forms of fandom, and understood that fandom as a specific and mostly hidden cultural form that in its own way empowered media users. The argument holds up to today for his own work *Convergence Culture* (Jenkins, 2006) and his readers, such as blogger Lisa Alvarado:

> "Get a life," William Shatner told Star Trek fans. Yet, in Textual Poachers, Henry Jenkins makes the case that fans already have a "life," one that gleans from popular culture, then revisions and redrafts its ownership into something akin to new mythology. Further, it is a consumer-driven culture, one outside the control of the corporate universe. I was … drawn to this book … when I read Jenkins' repudiation of fans as cultural dupes, social misfits, mindless TV and movie junkies.… As a fan (X-Files) and fic writer myself, I found it a useful delineation of a fiercely loyal, now international, subculture of renegade consumers of culture.[1]

Granted, Fiske's use of the term 'semiotic' democracy in *Television Culture* may have been confusing, although he always maintained that the television texts viewers found meaningful and pleasurable were a source of resistance *and* 'commodities that served the economic interests of their producers' (Jenkins, 2011: xxxiv). Likewise it is true that in Radway's analysis of romance reading the real-life relationships and living conditions of

her readers was not a focus – a glaring absence according to James Curran (1990). Today, the term 'semiotic democracy' is not often used and interest in media production and audiences is more balanced. Governmentality (Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1991), moreover, is a more prominent perspective than the 'cultural populism' of yesteryear (McGuigan, 1992). There is less need to defend popular culture as a worthy subject.

The media landscape over the same decades transformed from a mix of centralized media systems (including public and commercial broadcasting organizations and strong newspapers) into a more decentralized field controlled by a new mix of trans-national corporations that expedite new types of relations between media producers and consumers, and that offer a new range of media texts and experiences. Media content today ranges from literary books and quality audio-visual content distributed as film or television or as a game, to cheap productions. It is not unusual for any of the above to be made profitable by allowing for a high degree of viewer or reader involvement, or even a complete collapse of the distinction between producers and consumers. While the idea of participatory culture has captured our imagination and communicative practice is changing at a fast pace (Jenkins et al., 2009), media production is still mostly in the hands of institutional, mostly corporate players. While television research points to massive change both economically and in patterns of media use, this does not extend to 'television' as watched by billions around the globe (Enli, 2009; Karlsen et al., 2009; Lotz, 2007).[2] Media use has broadened to a wide array of choice: from public media, to free newspapers, to all sorts of commercial content, all of which can be used on individualized, miniaturized machines such as the smart phone, the tablet, the e-reader and the netbook, or on the old living-room television set (which may well be a flat screen hooked to a computer). Technological refinement is ongoing, choice appears abundant. It is equally easy for media users to feel empowered or to feel lost.

Literacy under these condition could mean a range of things. It could be the ability to use and understand written words across genres. It could be a more technological set of competences that allow one to use a variety of 'media-delivering machines'. It could be what the Dutch Council for Culture (Raad voor Cultuur, 2005) chose to call 'media wisdom': a combination of skills and knowledges that help a citizen to evaluate what he or she reads or views, and to partake in the collective project that links media and national culture in a globalized world. It could also simply be an individual's critical understanding of media culture that shields them from manipulation by the media for commercial or political reasons. All in all, there is remarkably little room for appreciation in this citizen's toolkit. Pleasure and meaning are replaced by disbelief and cynicism. Or are they? What is the current situation with media literacy 'IRL' (in real life, for the digitally illiterate)?

From the perspective of media audiences

Television, children and young people as media audiences are and have been a key area of social concern for a long time, often linked to the need for literacy training. Two small studies are used here to further develop our argument about (critical) literacy in audience research.

Parents of young children and pedagogical staff in day-care centres

Annika van den Berg (2010) was interested in a particular segment of the long-running much-lauded young children's programme *Sesame Street*, in which one of the adult characters in the show reads a story to the animals from an illustrated children's book. *Sesame Street*, however, while still on television, was not a favourite among the parents or the day-care professionals she approached through two different day-care centres and a swimming pool[3] (swimming lessons are obligatory in the Netherlands). They claimed the children found it boring or preferred other programmes. Mostly they were concerned to make clear that they were very careful in the amount of time their children watched television and in controlling what was on. They felt reading a book was much better: for the child's development and well-being, and for themselves: reading a book together was quality time.

> I think reading to a child this age [0–4 years old, JH] has many advantages: it is good for their language development … the fantasy of the children is ehhh [triggered] and they learn to concentrate. That is really right for this age. (professional in Berg, 2010: 30)

> Of course we read to our children. I mean reading to them is really really good for their development. And with Lamyae we found that she was really looking at things from a very early age onwards… especially photos and pictures, so we read to her…in my lap, looking at pictures… that is all that is needed… just leaf through a book (mother in Berg, 2010: 28).

Parents and day-care centre staff were as unequivocally positive about reading to young children as they were dismissive of television. Although *Sesame Street* has always had a very good press, neither the parents nor the professionals were very positive about the show. Educational television was not part of their vocabularies, different though they were as a group in terms of class background, family size and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity. Television viewing needed to be limited as much as possible and was used mostly as a substitute babysitter when dinner needed to be prepared or when parents wanted to sleep in or start the day at their ease.

> As a family we'll watch in the early morning. She wakes up quite early, half past six, and then we tune to children's public service programming [Nederland 3] … what is it called again?
>
> *Interviewer: Zappelin*?
>
> Yes! And we'll watch … she'll watch until seven and we get a chance to wake up a little.
>
> (Father, in Berg, 2010: 26)
>
> I prefer for them not to watch any television at all. That they do other things. Watching television is passive entertainment … they just watch … nothing else.… I don't think it makes them more creative. (Another father, in Berg, 2010: 22)

In her study of *Television and New Media Audiences*, Ellen Seiter points to the discrepancy between how television is used and how it is talked about.

> Babysitting young children is one of the things television does best. Television is undeniably handy for calming children down, confining them to one area, reducing noise in the classroom, and postponing demands for adult attention. But such uses of television are widely condemned by the vast majority of early childhood professionals – or ignored in the publications and research of such groups as the National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1999: 61)

Van den Berg finds a similar discursive construction of television in the Netherlands. Early childhood education and a system of icons to warn viewers about inappropriate content for children (*Kijkwijzer*, Watch smarter) are two key government initiatives. Early childhood education was welcomed by the day-care centre staff. It provided them with pedagogical means to help children who were behind in their development, for instance because their parents had little education or did not see the need to help their children develop this particular way. Both government initiatives stress that television is a dangerous medium. The icons implicitly advise parents to choose against television altogether. Likewise, in early childhood education, the exclusion of television as an educational tool is significant. This is a shame, concludes van den Berg, who quotes Dutch and other sources that underline that paying positive attention to children's television experience can help them become more literate (see also Hodge and Tripp, 1986: 178).

The most telling of van den Berg's results is her finding of a group that held an oppositional position: while looking for ethnic diversity in her sample of parents and pedagogical staff, she also made contact with a small number of non-native speakers. They felt that watching television was good for their (young) children's language acquisition. They saw none of the dangers that the other parents talked about at length. Her other key finding is the reconstruction she was able to make of book reading versus watching television. While she had expected to find a shared pleasure in both media, she turned out to have issued an open invitation to malign television and to cherish reading: television viewing makes children passive, diminishes their world, is only entertainment and offers a restrictive worldview; the medium will stimulate aggressive behaviour, individualize and isolate children and lacks variety. Books and book reading, on the other hand, activate children, enrich their fantasy, educate them, offer them a world with no boundaries or borders, stimulate language acquisition, help children and parents make contact, and is interactive and socializing. What started as a simple interest in whether *Sesame Street* offered a good means to broaden children's media literacy turned into a portrait of a witch hunt directed at television.

This is the propagation of literacy in its most conservative guise: book-based, strictly controlled by adults. Children are granted neither the ability nor the means to explore other media. Television is imbued with guilt on the part of parents and given special status as slightly off limits, and therefore all the more exciting, from a very early age onwards. Although this is a reconstruction of what parents and day-care professionals had to say about television and books and not an ethnography of the children's actual use of both media, it does make clear how rules and restrictions apply, rather than critical appreciation. The parents' discourse produces a hierarchical distinction between the literate and the non-literate. They reified book culture in a way that Neil Postman (1982) and other culture pessimists would applaud, by demonizing television in its entirety.

The media literacy of 12-year-olds

Marloes Mol (2011) was interested in older children's media literacy and approached 50 children through three primary schools in a large and a mid-sized city and a village. She asked them to make TV diaries for her. She taped her instructions on how to use these and discussed them in small groups. While the school environment was clearly slightly problematic and may have encouraged the children to stress what they felt they *learnt* from television, school is also a 'natural' environment for children aged between 4 and 16, in which they spend most of their week. A significant chunk of the time spent at school is leisure time, moreover: breaks, free hours, after-school care. Popular media and entertainment are certainly not absent in school environments. According to Duits' (2008) ethnographic research among girls in the same age group, it is discussed regularly.

Mol's first set of forms offered little that was useful in gauging whether and how her informants were media literate. The programmes they saw (a mixture across genres, and across children's and adult television) were mostly 'OK', 'exciting' or 'funny'. A more extended version became the television diary. It included questions such as: If you could make a television programme, what would it be like? Or: What do you think is not good in television for children? Bad for your eyes, said one child, and it can make you a-social. Generally, however, the children felt that commercials and reruns were what was wrong with television. They did not watch television via the internet to avoid these irritations. This would seem to be part of the technical media literacy of a slightly older audience group, who, according to national statistics, will move from broadcast television to internet-based viewing (Sikkema, 2009: 25). Good about television was that it offered fun, excitement, stories and drama. To learn new things was also valued highly – an artefact perhaps of the school setting? News and realism were mentioned on a par with funny and fake.

The understanding in the interview material that much of what television shows is not 'real' or live, but 'fake', comes across as a mix between disappointment (a little) and a happy sense of superior insight in the workings of television: media literacy. A 12-year-old boy said: 'And all those people, the presenters and so on, they read from a big video screen that says exactly what you have to say. It even has the jokes they make on it and all that.' Other children, too, had either witnessed or knew about the routines of television production, for example that a programme can be live but that more often it is filmed in bits and pieces (Mol, 2011: 52). Some of the girls were media literate in another way: they could explain how soaps might be fake, but also, in a way 'real'. Real versus fake is a theme the children liked to explore: there is the really real of the talent shows, although, even there, presenters use an autocue. The same is true for news programmes. 'What they say is never real, but the things that happened are of course.' After real versus fake, which would seem to be a clear opposition but, intriguingly, is not, classical entertainment characteristics are valued in television: humour, suspense and action. These are balanced, in turn, by the wish to learn from television. 'Things that you can learn from' usually referred to facts and information rather than to understanding in a wider sense.

Interesting is how the interviewed children explain the value of humour. Humour is of overriding importance they say, and 'funny' is one of the most frequently given reasons for liking a programme. Jokes and humorous situations make it easy to concentrate and to be drawn into the world of the show.

> Television viewing should be fun. So, with jokes, you keep focused. So, you'll have a programme
> with a good story and, I do think that needs jokes or I can't keep up and I don't get the story. (girl
> quoted in Mol, 2011: 72)

'Getting a joke' could well be a check for a 12-year-old viewer that she or he has a right
to watch a programme because they understand what it is about. Davies et al. assume as
much, based on interviews with both slightly younger and slightly older children:

> In cases like this, enthusiasm for the 'childish' and silly aspects of comedy were combined with a
> sense of exclusivity. In discussion, it was important for certain children to show that they could
> 'get' the joke (as it were), in order to show that they were grown up and sophisticated. (2000: 16)

While jokes, humour and 'funniness' keep you going as a television viewer, the children
Mol interviewed also like to learn from television. The problem is that the slope from
learning to boring is a steep one, as seen in a discussion about *The Children's News* (*het
Jeugdjournaal*) and *News from Nature* (two programmes that are appreciated by the
children):

Girl:	just talk, talk, talk, talk.
Interviewer:	Too much talking?
Boy:	Yes, that is the news, they do show a lot too, mind you.
Same girl:	That can also be boring

(in Mol, 2011: 57)

The problem of over-talkative and boring programmes, according to the children, could
easily be solved by inserting more jokes. One of the boys summarizes: 'Well, there are
things that we children simply do not like. And if we don't like it, we don't learn from
it either.' Overall, though, the children claim that they do incidentally learn from tele-
vision. In such cases they refer to small facts, news items and language acquisition
(Dutch television subtitles rather than dubs). Although not very elaborately, they also
claim to learn socially and emotionally from television. MTV's *Plain Jane*, for instance,
was appreciated for giving the girl who gets a make-over more self-confidence (TV
diary). In the group interview, the same girl explained: 'If you see someone making a
mistake, and you watch it, you don't have to make that mistake.' Mol concludes that,
although learning is what you can expect children to talk about in a school environment,
her informants make clear that television provides a forum for additional forms of learn-
ing: tips on how to live your life, new words, interacting with others. News and quiz
shows provide interesting facts, drama provides insight into social rules and the ability
to recognize emotions (Mol, 2011: 80).

If literacy is the ability to know what you like and why you like it, the interviewed
children do well. Across the schools, they share a preference for the commercial televi-
sion stations and for 'funny' television. They are, moreover, well able to explain that they
are interested in learning things, but that the makers of educational television seem to
have little understanding of the need to help children concentrate by using humour. It is
in many ways a shame that this group feels too old for public service television, which

provides exactly this type of mixed programme in a number of long-running shows. It is also entirely possible that they would not watch more news and informative programming if it were 'funnier'. Although the claim is doubtless sincere, the need to distinguish yourself as different from 'grannies' (adults) could well result in any type of programme that is labelled 'educational' being met with criticism.

Mol argues that, in their media evaluation, her informants link funny to real and to learning. In drama, comedy and animated series they are willing to ignore the fact that these are fictional programmes (fake) if they have something funny or informative to offer. Generally, though, the obvious deception in how 'real' television may look but is not (presenters reading an autocue), undermines their faith in any type of serious television. The use of humour and jokes implies a type of self-reflexivity and self-deprecation that they like: it suggests a shared sense of lack of control and overview. The unfortunate result is that they do not have the means (yet) to make full use of what television has to offer. It is not unlikely that, before they do, they will have already established themselves as viewers of a type of television that does not claim to be informative or highly knowledgeable. If television is not understood as in any way a trustworthy authority that has something real to offer beyond entertainment and incidental facts and information, much of what the medium also has to offer will pass a viewer by.

How does this compare to current definitions of media literacy? Aufderheide suggests that: 'A media literate person … can decode, evaluate, analyse, and produce both print and electronic media' (1993: 79). This relates to the Dutch Council for Culture definition of 'media wisdom'. But does it come anywhere near to what the parents of the young children and the 12-year-olds describe?

The parents and the children value distinction in different ways. The arguments of the 12-year-olds will not impress the parents of the young children. Funny is not exactly high on their list of what books do for children. The parents might concur that children learn incidentally from television, but whether they would greatly value such learning is questionable. The insistence of the children on having their own needs and taste points to a dilemma for those who want to defend the usefulness of media in literacy (training). Aufderheide's stress on being able to 'produce' print and electronic media might solve this dilemma. It would also enable and empower children to go beyond their obvious disappointment in the artificiality and fake authority of television. At present, however, what we found, is a conflation of literacy with a wish for upward mobility (book reading, active engagement with new worlds) and mechanisms of exclusion and distinction rather than inclusion. While distinction and exclusion are characteristics of all group and taste cultures, the combination with upward mobility is bothersome. It is worrying that upward mobility is best achieved by excluding particular forms of culture, tastes or groups of people. Literacy is linked to an elitist rather than a democratic sentiment.

The question is whether the problem lies with the reputation of popular media or with literacy as a concept? Clearly, book reading and readerly culture are felt to be gravely endangered. Children and young people today read less and less and spend more time using electronic media: gaming, communicating with friends, watching television and using internet-based sources and digital teaching aids for school (Spot, 2010). Insofar as literacy connects with reading and with books, it will link with a sense of culture lost and nostalgic longing for a past that was imagined to be far more cultured than the

world of today. This points to a discursive logic of taste that translates cultural capital into class position. If literacy is to be understood as the capacity to decode, analyse and evaluate 'coded content' (whether in writing, in audio-visual or in mixed formats), it needs to be disarticulated from this chain of signification. While cultural studies certainly managed to decouple reading from the image of passive enslavement to 'degraded' genres such as comic books or romance novels (Griswold et al., 2011: 20), it was 'the book' and maybe even 'printed reading matter' that was emancipated rather than reading or literacy as such.

Cynicism and sarcasm rather than affect or enjoyment define literacy

Though a starting point rather than finished research, these two studies make clear how a field could be carved out for empirical audience research that uses the reification of literacy and a quest for critical literacy as part of cultural studies. Conceptually, literacy would need to be defined beyond interpretative and technological skill, to include affect, pleasure and a sense of control (even when you are challenged). The ways in which literacy, taste and class position continue to be linked is not surprising. Less often acknowledged is the need for humour pointed out by Mol's 12-year-old informants. How do particular forms of literacy tie children and young people in to particular habits and a particular 'habitus'? These are the preoccupations of affect theory. Barring a small number of notable exceptions, neither the research literature nor everyday life evaluation of media are given to a strong interest in how and why we appreciate ordinary media culture and what it does for us. Unlike Jenkins (2007) in *The Wow Climax*, we are not looking for textual exploration of the popular aesthetic but for ways and means for audience studies to make renewed critical contact with everyday experience and the power relations that (co)produce it.

The aesthetic turn in discussion of media literacy offers possibilities though. Media literacy has become trapped in assuming that the ability to 'unmask' the self-serving tactics of the media's false representations suffices: such as recognition of the promise of authenticity in reality television served up with a generous dose of sensationalism and sometimes sex. Or, as the interviewed children were aware: your attention as a viewer in exchange for watching commercials. The ability to see the 'true' motives of the media industry is often voiced as concern on behalf of other viewers, who might be duped by these tricks. This mechanism is reminiscent of 'the third-person effect' found by media psychologists. 'Self-perceived knowledge may lead individuals to believe that they are immune to message effects, whereas others are more vulnerable' (Perloff, 1999: 366). Voiced as concern and criticism, self-perceived media literacy boosts the ego (Hermes, in press; Mueller and Hermes, 2010).Without a fuller understanding of literacy as part of media use, the concept will dissolve into general, dismissive cynicism which does not do justice to what might be of value in a text that deserves to be criticized in other respects, or it will dissolve into acceptance of the world as by and large outside of one's control. Whereas literacy should be a tool that affords the reader and the television viewer real added pleasure, it is currently in use as a shield for the possible contempt of others for being uncritical or dim-witted when it comes to the media.

If literacy does not automatically emancipate or afford viewing pleasure, we must return to the earlier issue: how do the media affect us? In an earlier article Grossberg (1992) uses 'mattering map' to describe fandom in everyday life. Fandom, he suggests is like an investment portfolio: part of you is 'invested' in a particular cultural form, an artist, a band. The investment ranges from psychic to material investments (buying albums or artefacts), to the organization of everyday life. As with investment portfolios, mattering maps will change over time. In more recent work, Grossberg (2010) subsumes the term 'mattering map' into a more broad-ranging discussion of affect. The key to understanding his argument about affect is to let go of 'culture' as the object of cultural studies. Cultural studies':

> real concern is always contexts and conjunctures. And since it can only study a conjuncture by studying relations, then the study of culture has to go through those relations and investigate everything that is not culture, even if, ultimately, in relation to culture. (2010: 169)

What matters here is therefore not how literacy is linked into notions of culture but more broadly how literacy and our current interest in it are related to other changes in today's world and how those changes are or are not articulated. The banking crisis and subsequent euro-crisis (as currency and as form of political commitment) could be as relevant as the changing of media platforms and the ways in which these changes (from the primacy of broadcasting to a mixed broadcasting and networked media landscape for instance) are being co-opted by global media industries.

Grossberg understands culture as the ensemble of mediation, signification and significance (2010: ch. 4). Couched in a Deleuzian framework, affect is understood as:

> a complex set of mediations/effects that are … a-signifying … non-individualized … and non-representational … and non-conscious.… Affect refers to the 'energy' of mediation, a matter of (quantifiable) intensity. Affect operates on multiple planes, through multiple apparatuses, with varied effects. (2010: 193)

A mattering map is both the product of and produced by 'affect', by an energy or the promise of becoming. Like the mattering map, literacy can be caught in this web. Literacy affects us (if one can put it this way) as a promise of becoming (something else, a better person, someone with more status, someone who will experience life itself in new ways). Literacy affects us bodily, materially: we may well find ourselves in other, different places, doing other kinds of things than we were used to doing. Our notion of who we are and might be and our actual activities are shaped by discursive apparatuses and involved in 'struggle over the real, in the forms of habits and the habitual' (2010: 194).

Paying attention to affect involves understanding how social pressure to be literate weaves us into webs of meaning and identity positions. It involves understanding the intrinsic pleasures of being literate, and the ways in which being disciplined into being literate are resisted. All of these forces will vary, depending upon the contexts and conjunctures that produce and shape literacy. Radical contextualization of literacy should therefore include our relation to popular culture as suddenly a non-issue, the celebration of the 'prosumer' or other incarnations of the 'active' media user at a time when the platforms for such active use are brought under the control of the market (Facebook as a

publicly traded company) and the strange interplay between cynicism and enchantment that media literate teenagers bear witness to (Lury, 2001). Literacy as a phenomenon is involved in how we are produced as a particular type of subject that is able to translate language to meaning, to lived reality (to paraphrase Grossberg, 2010: 201).

Critical literacy needs to allow us to understand this chain of constructions across different planes and regimes. It could thus release audience studies of its subsidiary position in relation to media studies. It could turn out to be the case that the media are of little relevance to such an investigation, while education or civic responsibility, or collective envy and hatred, or gender and sexual arrangements are. In other words, it would be doing cultural studies as an engaged critical practice that takes everyday meaning-making as its point of departure for broad-ranging cultural criticism. Affect is a necessary aspect to take into account in such an exercise. Beyond the meanings, significance and impact of popular media culture, there is the question of how being a media audience member is also being in a state of possible change. That is the dimension that audience studies needs to open up, that we need to tell (new) stories about. Insofar as the media come into this, they provide examples, a backdrop to understanding mechanisms of power and meaning. With affect and critical literacy working in tandem, while decentring the media text, we might well end up with a far better understanding of the mechanics *and* the magic of the mass media and popular culture. In the end, the uses of literacy for critical audience studies will be defined by allowing for criticism *and* appreciation, and by understanding what popular and mass culture might mean beyond cultural mechanisms of distinction for how we want to live our lives. That was also the upshot of the earlier project of cultural citizenship, which perhaps was not a strong enough story to tell, but is certainly a project worth pursuing (Hermes, 2005).

From a more everyday perspective, the double focus of critical literacy and being attentive to the functioning of affect should help us understand rather than ridicule the reassurance offered by today's mass and social media: that there *are* things that matter. Facebook suggests that *you* matter. All of television's programmes insist that they do. It simply does not happen that a television show says: never mind watching this, we spent very little money and energy making it – unless in jest. To enjoy television is to accept it as a mattering medium. To approach such a medium solely from the analytical perspective of media literacy, is to deny television its very raison d'etre. To watch television analytically is to forego its pleasures of immersion in a story, or the fantasies of being a well-informed citizen or an all-powerful consumer, or indeed the nightmares of the lives of others who are less well off than we are. It should not be forbidden for critical literacy to be … fun. Without retreating into populism, it is possible to make clear that there are things that matter, even though they are also commodities and reduce us to being a consumer, or less than a mere pawn on the corporate chessboard.

Critical literacy and audience studies

Can critical literacy provide a useful change of perspective in engaging with everyday practices of meaning-making in relation to the media? Can it help revitalize audience studies as a strong way of doing cultural studies? *Literacy* itself as a social problematic would benefit from the type of cultural studies perspective that Grossberg

specifies in *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (2010). Critical literacy fits well in such an endeavour. It aims, after all, according to Allan Luke, to set 'the conditions for students to engage in textual relationships of power '(Luke, 2000: 448). Audience research could certainly come out of such an encounter revitalized: by moving beyond the classroom to see whether, as media users, we are able to take up that particular struggle, not just in textual relationships but in realizing identities we feel we want to live and own. It is also evident that critical literacy – as a concept burdened with a 'complex history of contestation over the power and authority to access, interpret and produce printed text' (Luke, quoted in Livingstone, 2004: 4) – suits the more recent cultural studies projects that try to understand how we are all engaged in processes of (self-) government that knit emotion and affect into self-regulation and identity formation.

If anything, it is questionable whether audience studies should retain its focus on the media. The worrisome cynicism of savvy viewers has less to do with how media texts are made than with how cynicism can function in today's society. The type of media-focused literacy training that is given in schools (at least in the Netherlands) hardly produces the wisdom the Dutch Council for Culture would like to see – it produces disengagement. That suggests that if we aim for civic wisdom (the everyday version of engaged intellectualism), we need critical literacy to stay outside the machinery that formal education is. Linking the analytic power of governmentality studies to the engaged political force of critical literacy and a deep understanding of affect may well produce a new type of audience studies that starts from and respects the need to live in a world where there are things that do really matter.

Funding

Notes

1   Lisa Alvarado, at: http://blogcritics.org/books/article/book-review-textual-poachers-television-fans/, posted 2007 (accessed August 2012).
2   The percentage of television content published by amateurs, or individuals not working for television production companies or the television industry, is negligible. The references given point to research in participatory TV culture, as managed by television networks and companies, and to research in the changes of the industry. In a personal communication (29 August 2012), Skylla Janssen, who is researching new forms of television production involving non-professionals, assures me that the industry is largely closing itself against such practices. Her PhD will be defended in 2013.
3   Eight parents were interviewed at De Speeldoos, and five staff. Nine parents were interviewed at the Petteflet, and six staff. At the swimming pool aquacenter Den Hommel, nine parents were interviewed.

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