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hrough the 1980s, ethnographic theories and methodology have assumed increasing importance within the social sciences in general and cultural studies in particular.\(^1\) This ‘ethnographic turn’ is witnessed also in media studies focusing upon audiences and their various appropriations of the media.\(^2\) Why have ethnographic approaches gained such professional popularity within a relatively short period of time? What do ethnographic approaches bring to a politicized tradition of media research? In the following, I attempt to answer these questions by arguing that behind the current popularity of ethnography lies a concern for everyday life and everyday cultures that is as sincere as it is untheorized. What might be termed ‘the everyday’ resides as a discursive enigma of ethnographic media studies. I shall illuminate the conceptual history of the everyday and relate it to current issues in media reception thereby offering an important key to understanding the enigma, even if we may not unravel it: for as researchers we are part of the very everyday life that we also attempt to analyse.

**Ethnographic attractions**

Since cultural studies emerged in the 1970s in Britain as a distinct if never uniform voice in cultural research, ethnographic investigations have struck important notes and their results have continuously informed, but not dominated, theoretical debates also in media studies (Willis, 1977, 1980; McRobbie, 1978; Hobson, 1980). Still, these debates even today tend to limit themselves to an Anglo-American perspective (Lindlof, 1987; Brunsdon, 1989; Morley and Silverstone, 1990) that severely restricts an understanding of the wider socio-political contexts in which scientific discourses emerge and circulate. It is important to stress, therefore, that a broad interest in ethnographic approaches to media reception appeared roughly at the same time, or before, in several research milieux and in countries as diverse as Australia (Hodge and Tripp, 1986), Brazil (Leal,
1986, 1990) and Germany (Baacke et al., 1990; Rogge, 1991). While Anglo-American studies have been central in demonstrating how television is deeply embedded in gendered discourses and practices of the family, other ethnographic media investigations, not least in the Nordic countries, have foregrounded the often intricate relations between patterns of media reception found with specific groups and their self-styled media productions (Fornäs et al., 1988; Drotner 1989, 1991; Berkaak, 1989. But see also Willis et al., 1990). Today the ethnographic turn in media research is helping to bridge professional gaps between media researchers trained in disciplines of the arts or social sciences, and ethnologists or social anthropologists with their long-standing experience in studying cultural traditions, an approach that often marginalizes media beyond the book (Bausinger, 1984; Lögren, 1989; Hannerz, 1990b).

The discursive popularity of ethnography must be seen within the wider ramifications of social realignments and cultural diversification, developments that have been pertinent to public agendas since the 1970s. From then on, many countries have faced new challenges of adapting themselves to becoming multicultural societies with a more international political outlook and less economic independence. Because ethnography originated as a systematic means to understand and explain cultural meanings that are unknown to the investigator, an increasing number of social and cultural researchers not unnaturally looked towards the ethnographic tradition in their attempts to analyse new and complex developments closer to home. Beyond anthropology and ethnology, the research milieux first adopting ethnographic methodologies were often those that, for better or worse, were least bound by established institutional frameworks: women’s studies, ethnic studies, studies on youth.

Moreover, it could be argued that over the last twenty years, it is precisely women, ethnic groups and young people who have spearheaded more general developments within modernity towards internationalization and multiculturalism. When women, chicanos, and blacks entered the academy in larger numbers during the 1970s, their positions fundamentally served to politicize and dislocate established discursive hierarchies. So researchers, men and women of all colours and several ages, simply had to sensitize their theories and methodologies to a changing set of realities.

Of more immediate importance, it seems to me, ethnographic perspectives offer an alternative to two paradigms dominating the arts and social sciences, namely the structural and the action paradigms. While British researchers in the late 1970s labelled this opposition ‘structuralism vs. culturalism’ (Hall, 1980), a similar opposition with dissimilar political inflections resonated in other quarters of research under headings such as positivism vs. Marxism, semiology vs. critical theory, micro vs. macro analysis, qualitative vs. quantitative approaches, etc. The contradictory and multifaceted social and cultural developments made such theoretical dichotomies increasingly untenable, and the turn towards ethnography may be regarded as an attempt to overcome this intellectual impasse while retaining a micro-perspective. Conversely, on a macro-level of analysis,
Jürgen Habermas (1984) and Anthony Giddens (1984) have offered perhaps the most controversial theoretical innovations (for a critique, see, e.g., Mouzelis, 1991).

What unites the micro- and macro-perspectives, however, is their joint heritage from the 1960s and 1970s: a concern with ethical aspects of social and cultural change that necessitates a continual scholarly self-reflexivity. It is this concern that most clearly separates them from deconstructivist attempts to evade the dichotomy of the respective paradigms of structure and action. In short, it is precisely the complexity of ethnography that makes it so popular: it seems better equipped to prise open for analysis the ambivalences of modernity in its present phase of development. In order to specify what an ethnographic approach does (and what it evades or fails to do), let us turn to its expansion within media studies.

**Media ethnography**

Ethnographic perspectives on the media have emerged as an elaboration and a revaluation of the increasing attention paid to the receiving end of communication. From the early 1980s on, a number of so-called reception studies have analysed the various ways in which people interpret media messages within specific social contexts. While a few investigations have adopted a historical perspective (Grimm, 1977; Drotner, 1983, 1988; Moores, 1988; Barker, 1989: 62–91; O'Sullivan, 1991), most reception analyses focus upon contemporary media, particularly television, and apply methods such as textual analysis and in-depth interviews (for an overview of the latter trend, see Jensen, 1991).

In reception analysis, we presuppose that two processes are possible. First, that we may isolate distinct subjects and objects: interpretive communities of people exist in a pre-given social reality that they may then variously interpret and evaluate through cultural objects such as the media. Second, reception studies presuppose that it is possible for the researcher to locate and then analyse the relation between this pre-given reality and the media contents. Within reception studies a traditional semiological focus on the media text is replaced by an attention to the media context and to the relations between text and context. But substituting a multiple media context for the media text does not resolve the problem of interpretation: the substitution merely leaves us with a new text to be decoded and interpreted.

Women in modernity occupy a contradictory position between public and private domains of power, a position that has made feminist researchers particularly sensitive to rules of interpretation and to discursive self-reflection. Hence, feminist media researchers are also among the first within their respective professional domains to turn their interest to the activities of reception (Hobson, 1980, 1982; Brunsdon, 1981; Modleski, 1982; Drotner, 1983; Radway, 1984; Ang, 1985; Eskola, 1989). And, not unnaturally, they are among the first to recognize and voice the problems

*THE EVERYDAY* IN RECENT MEDIA STUDIES 343
facing reception studies. The American media researcher Janice Radway describes it this way:

No matter how extensive the effort to dissolve the boundaries of the textual object or the audience, most recent studies of reception, including my own, continue to begin with the 'factual' existence of a particular kind of text which is understood to be received by some set of individuals. (Radway, 1988: 363)

The problem, as Radway sees it, is that the relation between text and context remains an external relation. The most radical dissolution of this split between text and audience is poststructuralism or deconstruction. Here, no concrete subjects are feasible because no fixed meanings are possible—only a range of competing discursive practices. But what do we do if we want to pursue empirical investigations of the media? Here, we do not encounter eternally fractured subjects but groups of people who talk to us, interact with one another, and live with the media irrespective of the fact that we may analyse their identities as discursively inscribed and constantly shifting. It is at this juncture that many media researchers concerned with reception processes turn to ethnography. Radway suggests:

I have begun to wonder whether our theories do not impress upon us a new object of analysis, one more difficult to analyze because it can’t be so easily pinned down—that is, the endlessly shifting, ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life and the way in which the media are integrated and implicated within it. (Radway, 1988: 366)

According to Radway, ‘ethnography may still be the most effective method for organizing such an expedition because it makes a concerted effort to note the range of daily practice and to understand how historical subjects articulate their cultural universe’ (1988: 366). In a similar vein, David Morley and Roger Silverstone, pioneers in British reception analyses of television, very perceptively argue for

a recontextualisation of the study of television viewing (among other uses of communication technologies)—within the broader context of a range of domestic practices. However, in acknowledging audiences as active in a range of ways as they integrate what they see and hear into their domestic lives, we should not romanticize or exaggerate the audience’s creative freedoms. There is a difference between power over a text and power over an agenda. (Morley and Silverstone, 1990: 34)

Morley and Silverstone stress the importance of combining the particularity of ethnographic explanation with ‘an analysis of the varieties of forms of organization of domestic space between and within cultures’ (1990: 34). By emphasizing the necessity to link micro- and macro-perspectives of analysis, the authors address a classic and contested issue also in media studies, an issue that resonates with particular clarity as divisions in the current (media) ethnographic debate (Geertz, 1988; Hammersley, 1992: 85–95; Corner, 1991a).
According to the Dutch media researcher Ien Ang, we must develop 'a “globalization” of the ethnographic pursuit' and look for the concrete ways in which hegemony becomes inscribed into specific cultural forms and practices (1990: 244). In her concluding chapter to Desperately Seeking the Audience, Ang expands upon her call on future media studies to apply an ‘ethnographic understanding’, i.e., ‘a form of interpretive knowing that purports to increase our sensitivity to the particular details of the ways in which actual people deal with television in their everyday lives’ (1991: 165). Acknowledging the institutional constraints of television reception as Morley and Silverstone do, she tackles the problem of macro vs. micro analysis like this:

[Ethnographic understandings] cannot – and should not – give rise to prescriptive and legislative solutions to established policy problems, precisely because the ironic thrust of ethnography fundamentally goes against the fixities of the institutional point of view. What it can do, however, is encourage public debate over the problems concerned, by informing critical discourses on television – as a cultural form, as a medium ever more firmly implanted in the everyday texture of modern society – that are independent from established institutional interests. Seriously taking up the virtual standpoint of actual audiences is likely to highlight the limitations of any particular institutional arrangement of television, and can thus serve as a vital intellectual resource for the democratization of television culture (Ang, 1991: 166).

Radway and Ang as well as Morley and Silverstone indicate some important similarities that underly much media ethnographic debate today. The ethnographic approach is commonly defined as an extension of reception studies in two directions: first, in empirical terms the context of investigation is widened to include areas beyond the immediate situation of reception. Thereby media researchers hope to bridge the empirical gap in reception analysis between text and audience (texts are used as part of our everyday interactions). Second, in methodological terms, participant observation and informal talks are applied in order to complement in-depth interviews that form the basis of most reception studies. As an attempt to overcome the more structural approaches found in both semiology and uses-and-gratifications theories, media ethnographers apply a variety of methods in order to better grasp the dynamics of mediated meaning-making (texts acquire new meanings when used — and they are used as part of everyday life).

What finally unites this extension of the research perspective is an epistemological attention to everyday life. As already noted, Radway, for example, calls for research perspectives that prioritize the 'endlessly shifting ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life' (Radway, 1988: 366), while Roger Silverstone goes so far as to claim: ‘Television is everyday life. To study the one is at the same time to study the other [...] Yet it is precisely this integration into the daily lives of those who watch it which has somehow slipped through the net of academic enquiry’ (Silverstone, 1989: 77).

Still, when it comes to actual investigation and evaluation of the media
from an ethnographic perspective, this general agreement dissolves. For example, media ethnographers come up with very different answers after studying the fan cultures that have emerged internationally around the mega-star Madonna: does she or does she not enhance her audiences’ gendered empowerment? (Fiske, 1987; Lewis, 1990; Schwichtenberg, 1993). The variety of the answers could be explained in pure empirical terms as a result of variation among the groups under investigation — they simply cannot be compared and therefore results will differ. But such an answer evades the thorny issue of reliability, an issue that faces all researchers even if it has been an explicit point of discussion mainly in interpretive studies. The variety of answers, it seems to me, point as much to media ethnographers’ often insufficient reflexivity on the theoretical and epistemological foundations of their work.

More generally, media ethnography seems to repeat and even radicalize the well-known opposition within mass-communication research between cultural pessimism and cultural optimism. Few media ethnographers have noted this opposition let alone offered an explanation for its existence. Thus, Ang exercises a well-known strategy in establishing new research agendas against existing ones: she stresses the unity of media ethnography by noting that the ‘ethnographic thrust in audience studies has functioned as a way of relativizing the gloomy tendency of an older perspective within cultural studies, namely ideological criticism’ (Ang, 1990: 245). Such an approach may all too easily serve to dismiss both the actual strengths that ideological criticism may harbour and the insights that may be gained from probing into the possible reasons behind the divisions found within media ethnography itself.

In my view, an important entry into such an internal discursive archaeology is to make a closer inspection of the epistemological foundations of media ethnography. Here, we immediately encounter very divisive uses of the term ‘everyday’. To date, no media ethnographer has defined what he or she means by this concept. It seems timely, therefore, to net the concept for closer scrutiny.

‘The everyday’: outline of a conceptual history

In a short article from 1978, the late Norbert Elias ruminates about the status of the everyday in academic discourse: ‘Not long ago, it was possible to apply the notion of ‘the everyday’ in an everyday fashion [...] But now the concept of the everyday has assumed the status of the non-everyday [einem recht unalltäglichen Begriff]. It is loaded with the weight of theoretical reflection and has assumed a key importance in current sociological trends’ (Elias, 1978: 22). And in historical and philosophical trends too, one might add. The concept of the everyday lost its innocence as part of the political radicalization that took place in a number of academic disciplines during the 1970s and that brought about a questioning of seemingly self-evident processes and relations. The everyday came to denote the more imperceptible aspects of social interactions: it has to do with
informal networks and it deals with the often unrecognized minutiae of perception and action.

But as Elias goes on to note, the growing popularity of the everyday across a range of disciplines was, and continues to be, united more in what is excluded or opposed than in a positive definition of what the term itself implies. This is evident also in media studies. Here, the everyday is defined by setting it against the formal structures and visible laws dominating for example school, work and politics. This implies that the everyday is often primarily linked to consumption (Radway, 1988; Willis, 1991) or to family interaction (Silverstone, 1989; Morley and Silverstone, 1990). It is within these webs of social relations that media reception is seen to be located and accorded meaning. But behind this loose framework, the concept of the everyday is conceived of in two radically opposite ways, oppositions that resonate as a relative optimism and pessimism in empirical evaluations.

A classic proponent of the pessimist approach to the everyday is the French Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre (b. 1905) whose monumental Everyday Life in the Modern World has become a standard point of reference. The first volume appeared in 1946, the second volume in 1963, while a recent English translation from 1984 is termed ‘a digest’ of the final volume. Here, the author makes a number of important self-reflections on his initial ideas, a natural result of such a lifelong study. Even so, his basic frame of reference and his key arguments remain unaltered. Through a sweeping exposé of civilization, Lefebvre shapes his main contention, namely that modernity and the everyday, or quotidian to use a philosophical term, are reciprocal aspects of the same historical development:

The quotidian is what is humble and solid, what is taken for granted and that of which all the parts follow each other in such a regular, unvarying succession that those concerned have no call to question their sequence; thus it is undated and (apparently) insignificant; though it occupies and preoccupies it is practically untellable, and it is the ethics underlying routine and the aesthetics of familiar settings. At this point it encounters the modern. This word stands for what is novel, brilliant, paradoxical and bears the imprint of technicality and worldliness; it is (apparently) daring and transitory, proclaims its initiative and is acclaimed for it. (Lefebvre, 1990: 24)

According to Lefebvre, the emergence of modernity implies a separation of economic production and social production (including consumption and human reproduction), a separation that equally sets up a hierarchy of social power relations (and, crucially, gender and age relations, one might add). The everyday, says Lefebvre, harbours a dialectic of routines and resources, but he finds that people’s creative resources are being crushed under the weight of an economic rationality that is increasingly institutionalized and taken over by commodification and state bureaucracy. His historical perspective serves both to direct his investigation and to legitimate its aim. In premodern societies, he contends, every aspect of life was imbued with style:
In former times *labours of skill* were produced, whereas today we have (commercialized) *products* and exploitation has replaced violent oppression. Style gave significance to the slightest object, to actions and activities, to gestures; it was a concrete significance, not an abstraction taken piecemeal from a system of symbols [. . .] That is why we must contrast style and culture, to show up the latter’s fragmentary character, its lack of unity, and why we are justified in formulating a revolutionary plan to recreate a style, resurrect the Festival and gather together culture’s scattered fragments for a transfiguration of everyday life. (Lefebvre, 1990: 38)

Lefebvre’s ethical base line is revealed not only through his revolutionary aims to transform everyday life, but equally in his negative evaluation of modernity: by presupposing a closer unity in the past, a unity that he does not demonstrate, he fuels his critique of the present. From this moral pessimism it is only a short step to equal the everyday with total alienation if not false consciousness. Indeed, this stance imbued a number of social scientists of the 1960s and 1970s (Leithäuser, 1976; Heller, 1981), just as it fuelled ideological criticisms of modern cultural processes including the media as noted by Ang (1990).

However, it seems to me that Lefebvre merits more than historical interest to media scholars for two reasons: he makes a crucial connection between modernity and the development of the everyday, and he emphasizes that the everyday infuses all aspects of life, not merely the family or leisure. These aspects are timely reminders also to scholars of media reception who all too often fail to situate their investigations in a specific historical perspective, and whose emphasis on one mass medium tends to obscure the influence of other media. For as Morley and Silverstone remind us, ‘we must [. . .] beware of overprivileging more “visible” media to the neglect of others’ (1990: 46). The ethnographic view of media reception as being part of social interaction serves to redress such imbalances.

While Lefebvre’s cultural pessimism certainly infused a number of early reception studies and continues to resonate in warnings about the public’s limited range of power over and insight into media production, more media scholars today are influenced by the optimism of his younger follower Michel de Certeau. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the author acknowledges Lefebvre as ‘a fundamental source’ for his own work (de Certeau, 1988: 205). De Certeau, in accordance with the original title of his book (*Arts de faire*), defines everyday practices as ‘“ways of operating” or doing things’. While Lefebvre’s strength lies in his daring historical perspective on the everyday, de Certeau’s usefulness resides in his descriptions of what governs everyday activities. In the book, he traces what he calls ‘the systems of operational combination (*les combinatoires d’operations*)’, and these systems he locates within a cultural power struggle between the producers of culture and the so-called ‘non-producers’. This power struggle, he contends, is primarily fought in the area of consumption. Centrally, he analyses the struggle as an opposition between planned
strategies applied by the elite rulers and the subversive tactics of the masses. A tactic

must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the property powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. In short, a tactic is an art of the weak. (De Certeau, 1988:37)

Unlike Lefebvre, de Certeau stresses the masses’ continued resourcefulness in everyday life. But like his predecessor, de Certeau structures his analytical framework along binary oppositions. In my view, he idealizes the tactics of everyday practices as the locus of subversion and resistance: he does so, first, by attempting to locate a certain, unified group, the masses, through their social oppression; and second, by implying that through their everyday practices they develop a popular culture that nurtures more genuine, more ingenuous social relations: the less social power, the more ‘deviousness, fantasy, or laughter’ (de Certeau, 1988:xvii). I doubt whether such carnivalesque perspectives sit well with people in need of a job, an apartment or reliable social contacts.

Australian Tony Schirato has recently defended de Certeau’s theories by claiming that we have to understand them as discursive practices and interventions, not as analyses of ‘real’ instances or historical trends. With reference to Derrida, Schirato says:

It is necessary for any representation of the popular to claim not only to be in the place of the other, but that they are the other; or rather that there is no other in any strict sense. Now the notion of the other is already inscribed in – one might even say that it is, to a certain extent, constitutive of – so-called scientific inquiry [. . .] This is the kind of illogic within the logical that de Certeau points to: I must renounce otherness in order to call it up, to constitute it, to represent it. (Schirato 1993: 290)

Schirato’s apologia raises more questions than it purports to answer. The most fundamental are these: what sort of ‘scientific inquiry’ does Schirato inscribe? Given that de Certeau’s theories are to be understood as discursive interventions, does this invalidate their appropriation by, for example, empirical media ethnographies? Schirato clearly operates with a positivist image of science as an ideal predicated upon distance: we either speak the popular from the empowered vantage-point of academic science, or we renounce all claims to discursive power and insight by immersing ourselves into the popular. In my view, such a dualism simply mirrors de Certeau’s idealism and romanticism at a different level. More importantly, it serves to sleight the vital discussion of scientific reflexivity that I mentioned earlier. I would agree with British sociologist Martyn Hammersley who argues for a different scientific approach. In an insightful critique of what he terms the paradigms of realism and relativism he proposes to adopt a ‘subtle realism’ (Hammersley, 1992: 50), an approach that basically serves to acknowledge that we are always and by necessity part of what we investigate, and hence

THE EVERYDAY’ IN RECENT MEDIA STUDIES 349
academic self-reflexivity is (or should be) an integrated element in any scientific endeavour.

Certainly, within media studies de Certeau's or indeed Schirato's eloquent discursive dichotomies are little help in understanding the more intricate processes of meaning-making that are fought over, accepted and contested in daily life. Here, we need much finer-tuned analytical instruments that capture the interface between rules and ruptures of media reception without losing sight of its everyday inscriptions. Such interfaces are theorized by Alfred Schutz (1899–1959), a lesser-known pioneer of everyday theory that seems to me analytically eye-opening to ethnographic media studies because he evades the familiar dichotomies (elite-masses, acceptance-resistance). He does so not by investigating the media but by exploring the basics of social life and social investigation: time, space and interpersonal relations. Of these aspects, I want to draw attention to his pragmatic understanding of social interaction and to his notion of time.

Influenced by Edmund Husserl's phenomenological theory of the life world (Lebenswelt), and in opposition to Alfred Weber's attempts to construct objective social types, Schutz aims to describe and interpret the intersubjective dimension of social action: What are the principles that accord our day-to-day social activities with meaning? As is evident already in his major work, Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt (1932), Schutz opposes the essentialism found in traditional phenomenology by stressing that life consists not of one but of 'multiple realities' whose main elements are those of everyday life, science, the arts, dream and religion. Among these, he defines everyday life as a paramount reality in the sense that it fundamentally colours other forms of understanding and interaction.6 Schutz takes as his basic frame of reference the self-evidence of the everyday: it is as easy to recognize as it is difficult to define. We operate in and on everyday life from a basic assumption that the world exists as we ourselves see it:

As long as the once established scheme of reference, the system of our and other people’s warranted experiences works, as long as the actions and operations performed under its guidance yield the desired results, we trust these experiences [...] It needs a special motivation, such as the irruption of a ‘strange’ experience not subsumable under the stock of knowledge at hand or inconsistent with it, to make us revise our former beliefs. (Schutz, 1973: 228)

Everyday life is self-evident and everyday interactions are pragmatic. Everything is interpreted and accorded meaning within this framework of familiarity that at once serves to define and delimit the everyday. Hence, the everyday is transformed through the unfamiliar, or more precisely through instances that can be recognized as ‘strange’, as Schutz says, without being overlooked or ignored as incomprehensible. We are not totally locked in routines and repetition, but neither are we totally unbounded by rules and regulations. The everyday is a malleable mode of existence.

Schutz anchors this everyday interaction in space and time. Inspired by the
philosopher Henri Bergson, he is one of the first social scientists to theorize spatio-temporal relations. His point of departure is interpersonal communication with its simultaneity of time and its mutual location in space. This shared presence serves to combine each individual’s notion of ‘inner time’ (what Bergson terms *durée*) with the actual communication process happening in the measurable time of the outer world. Interpersonal communication thus transforms both ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ notions of time into what Schutz calls a *vivid present* in which each participant exists as an ‘undivided total self’ (Schutz, 1973: 216). Now, mass communication is of course precisely defined (among other aspects) by its dislocation of such time-space relations. But it is Schutz’s fundamental point that other forms of communication, including the media, *when seen from the aspect of interpretation*, originate in the shared ‘vivid present’ that we attempt to bring within our reach:

The whole system thus extended over all the different strata of the social world shows altogether all the shades originating in the perspectives of sociality such as intimacy and anonymity, strangeness and familiarity, social proximity and social distance, etc. which govern my relations with consociates, contemporaries, predecessors, and successors. (Schutz, 1973: 225–6)

Following Schutz, the media, too, are interpreted within the joint processes of recognition and rejection, repetition and innovation, that shape the everyday. His theories are very general and cannot be directly transferred to actual instances of media reception, just as they lack every notion of wider relations of institutional power or historical specificity (Schutz, for example, misses Lefebvre’s fundamental point that it is modernity that brings about the fixing of time as chronological time). Even taken on phenomenology’s own terms, Schutz’s analysis may seem as self-evident as the everyday life he attempts to systematize. But then what is basic is often banal. What in my view commends Schutz’s treatment of the everyday in relation to media reception is precisely his combination of empirical simplicity and conceptual complexity.

First, Schutz focuses on basic elements of social relations, space and time, the last being emphasized by a number of media researchers as a crucial aspect to a nuanced understanding of how mediated meaning is constituted today (Hobson, 1982; Bryce, 1987; Morley and Silverstone, 1990). Second, he treats these basic elements as complex processes of interaction rather than as structures of acceptance or opposition, and such an approach goes well with ethnographic media analysis. Third, like Lefebvre, Schutz emphasizes that the everyday is everywhere: it is a view upon and within the world rather than a sphere of life. But while Lefebvre notes and deplores the self-evidence and repetitiveness of everyday life, Schutz actually takes this as a basic point of conceptual reference: how is meaning created, sustained and changed within the framework of self-evidence? This view sits equally well with an ethnographic perspective that operates across a range of social sites and through a variety of means. Furthering Lefebvre’s and Schutz’s own
arguments, we might reach the conclusion that in our everyday lives we try to make sense in a modern society without truths. Everyday life is a means to create some certainty in a world of ambivalence. And the media are part of that process.

Despite convergent elements between theories of everyday life and ethnography, the everyday as a theoretical concept is not immediately applicable to media studies. As we have seen, the concept is developed by philosophers and sociologists with little experience or interest in mass communication. Should media researchers then just abandon a conceptual interest in the everyday and go on treating it as a loose framework for a range of empirical practices? Should we rather speak concretely about relations within the family, leisure or work? I do not think so. First of all, I do not think that media ethnography is a panacea to all issues in media or cultural studies, and so not all researchers need to nurture a professional awareness of everyday life. Secondly, for those of us who do engage in media ethnography, it is vital to conceptualize the everyday and to sensitize it to theoretically informed empirical studies. In my view, we need to specify much more directly what Ang discusses in general terms when she urges media researchers to unravel ‘the intricate intersections of the diverse and the homogeneous’ (Ang, 1990: 251). By way of conclusion I would like to outline some key points of relevance for future empirical media ethnographies.

Everyday media

If it is true that the everyday is characterized by its self-evidence, and if it is also true that media reception is lodged within an everyday framework that bases meaning-making on the interpersonal processes of communication, then media reception may be analysed as attempts to select and combine those textual aspects that bring us closest to a sense of being in the flow of the moment, ‘the vivid present’ in Schutz’s terms. Such an approach merits closer consideration of two key elements in the signification processes of the everyday, namely repetition and recognition. Repetition has to do with the social dimension of reception, i.e. time and space relations in a familiar framework. Recognition is linked to what we (can) perceive, that is the textual dimension of reception. As Brunsdon (1989) and others have rightly remarked, textual analysis is all too often marginalized in ethnographic analyses in favour of a central concern with processes of interaction. So let me stress that the elements of repetition and recognition are heuristic devices that allow us to specify both the textual and social dimensions of everyday reception.

Within the textual dimension, then, we could analyse the recognition process of reception as a meandering between elements that are so familiar that they seem insignificant, and then elements that lie so far beyond the flexible borders of familiarity that they seem strange as to be incomprehensible. How soon do we recognize a sitcom, for example? How do we approach news of foreign affairs? Which aspects of the news do we
incorporate because they resemble our own knowledge? Which aspects are ignored or labelled exotic? Do we sometimes see what we cannot recognize? As may be seen, the elements that we thus select and combine may range from bits of music or a well-known voice, to larger textual segments, layouts, or types of programme in the visual flow of television.

As for the social dimension of reception, we could further the attention already being paid in reception analysis to repetition, that is the rules applied to the when and the where of reception: what are the routines surrounding people’s media use? Do they switch on the radio or the video the minute they enter the room? Is the day structured according to certain programmes? What does it take to create a pleasurable evening in front of the box? What is the space accorded various media in people’s day-to-day interactions?

In my own empirical work on young people’s visual media cultures, notions such as these have helped advance my understanding of the relations shaped between video reception and video production: precisely because the participants bracketed off the production of videos as processes beyond the everyday, something extraordinary, non-repetitive and futile, they were able to come to terms with the ordinary and the familiar. Through this perspective they approached the everyday in new ways including new ways of understanding and using ‘ordinary’ film and videos. On a textual level this bridging of the extraordinary and the familiar surfaced in genre negotiations between action elements, favoured by the boys, and emotional elements, preferred by the girls. The resulting video production stressed humour that was the genre everybody could agree upon (Drotner, 1989, 1991).

I have described these very general aspects of everyday media reception on a synchronous level. But the perspective may be applied equally to a diachronic media ethnography. For by combining the aspects of repetition and recognition, we may follow how reception develops over time and through space: for example, genres may be regarded as results of a constant manoeuvring in which the aspect of recognition plays an important role: recognizing a genre is precisely a moving between the poles of insignificance and incomprehension. What lies in between constitutes a meaningful, even enjoyable, field of interpretation. Equally, memory is rooted in attempts to repeat past events by fixing them in time and locating them in space. The diachronic perspective is central to an understanding of media reception that reaches beyond the here and now. Our present mediated meanings are always coloured by our memories of situated media events and by our anticipations of what we may expect in the future.

Hopefully, this brief sketch of synchronic and diachronic perspectives of reception processes may serve to highlight that the concept of the everyday is fruitful for a nuanced media ethnography. While ethnography naturally covers only part of the media picture, it seems to me that it covers a part that our future communicative environment may force even closer to the centre of attention. For by approaching the media from people’s everyday lives, the breadth of ethnography facilitates two vital forms of analysis. First, we get attuned to recognizing intertextualities that are becoming more and more evident aspects of media output on a number of levels ranging from
cross-selling on MTV to genre hybridization. Second, ethnography may enhance our understanding of how an increasingly global media production is differentiated by being appropriated and located in people’s everyday lives. This everyday life, as I have attempted to demonstrate, is everywhere, it is a view upon the world, a way of acting in the world, that crosses social registers of private and public space. For better or worse, the media development itself makes sure that we come to realize that this is also the case.

Notes

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Where not otherwise indicated, translations are made by the author.

3 Naturally, publication dates in English are no reliable guide to discursive dissemination on a national level. Because English is an academic meta-discourse, it serves to purport a closed circuit of theoretical inclusion and exclusion.
4 The feminist importance in the formation of reception studies is repeatedly underscored (Lull, 1990; Jensen, 1991). Routine references to Ang’s and Radway’s work without an active engagement with their feminist theories merely serve to highlight the fact that the growing academic acceptance of reception analysis is inversely proportional to an acknowledgement of its broad feminist legacy (Drotner, 1993).
5 In Drotner (1993) I offer a critique of the common definition of media ethnography as an extension of reception study.
6 In ethnography, the concept of multiple realities has sometimes been taken to indicate cultural relativism in the sense that different cultures harbour different ‘views of the world’ (Hammersley, 1992: 46). As may be seen, this is not the way I apply the term.
7 Certainly, Schutz’s theories have profoundly influenced sociologists and philosophers working on everyday life, but they are also discernible in more general theorizings such as Giddens’s notion of time and his distinction between discursive consciousness, practical consciousness and unconsciousness (Giddens, 1984: 49).

References

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