The use of the concepts of media and cultural studies in education
1. Introduction

Television as we find it nowadays is often estimated as a medium which is far from capable to provide its audiences with educational matters. Aspects such as screen violence suggest that its (apparently direct) influence may rather hinder or have serious effects than enforce personal, above all, children’s development, let alone be any useful for educational purposes.

Thus, it may seem to be rather problematic to discuss television as a medium which can actually be used in educational ways. The crucial point is that pedagogical approach trying to combine the research made on television and audience reception with media education still sticks to an obsolete view on television, mass communication as a whole and the way it is “read” by its audiences, for it remains in the “what does television do to its viewers?” patterns derived from the so-called Laswell theorem which supposes a rather direct and linear media influence which can be estimated as “influenced by its literary antecedents, within which readers have been regarded as largely unproblematic”¹.

Moreover, it still seems to be caught in the trap of the obsolete theory of manipulation suspicion: As Kaj Wickbom sums up a Swedish Project in Media Education:

“(…) The aim is to train pupils to be aware and critical towards media’s attempts to manipulate and influence. But also to be creative in mind and thought. An important part presents the comprehension of the process of media; who says what to whom with what effect?”²

This suggestion that the effect will be depending only on the “who” in the shape of the sender of the given message, may be widely spread in general, that is, everyday and somewhat trivial discourse about the media.

Apart from this, as Len Masterman points out, “this [mass communication] has generated few positive results largely because of the difficulties of separating out the influence of communications from the influence of other social phenomena, such as the family, the peer-group, opinion leaders and so on.”³

This linear notion of communication, however, has been somewhat rejected by current media research, for it ignores the fact that people do show engagement in the process of media reception. Audience activity, which is to be understood as a structured reading process, will generate a meaning production on the side of the audience as well as on the side of the sender.

To produce meaning can be seen as a pragmatic process of learning which thus may be fruitful in terms of education. Unfortunately, this option seems to be continuously neglected:

¹ Masterman, Teaching The Media, p. 236
² Wickbom, Media Education in Sweden, p. 65
³ Masterman, Teaching The Media, p. 215
“However, TV research has not been widely recognised by the educational community as a valid pedagogical project. Why? Probably because we still tend to use a narrow notion of pedagogy, as something that takes place in schools and in schools only. In my opinion, this point of view makes us unable to understand much of what – and why – is going on in contemporary education, in the processes of defining and re-defining individual and collective identities, in constructing and reconstructing the social. For me [Tomasz Szkudlarek], the most valuable is the approach we can find in the tradition of cultural studies, where every-day culture, pedagogy, and politics are treated as interrelated dimensions of textual production and understanding.”

Certainly, it has to be mentioned that public service television can be seen as aiming at educational goals rather than private television. This is, of course, based on the different intentions: Whilst private television aims to establish popular programmes to improve its market value which will lead to higher costs for the setting of commercials, public service television mainly has to follow the Grundversorgungsauftrag des öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunks which is a mixture of education, news coverage and entertainment in which the first have to play the dominant role and consider the so-called Bildungsauftrag. Thus, one could estimate that within this dual system, public service can educate people, whereas private television is appropriate solely for purposes of light entertainment, relaxation and so on.

However, the way in which the audience makes use of what it watches on television, no matter what sort of programme they are tuned in to, should be seen as a reading, thus learning, process influenced and partially determined by the respective social backgrounds they come from. This, of course, cannot be estimated as a simplistic stimulus-response pattern but a highly differentiated process which has to be considered in current media education research.

Szkudlarek points out that “we are obliged to (...) understand how people’s lives are shaped by the rhetorics of culture/education/politics, and at the same time how these forces are appropriated and resisted by

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4 Szkudlarek, Television as Adult Pedagogy: Learning Consumerism, Dreaming Democracy, p. 71
the people, how they are displaced and re-written, or just how they serve their needs and fulfil their pleasures. This is where – and how – the subjects are constructed nowadays. Which, after all, is the major concern of educational theory.”

Thus, to understand that cultural practices – and watching TV, defined as an active process, is obviously part of these - are a crucial part of the meaning production can then be taken as a first step towards a more efficient and realistic education which will certainly profit from the inclusion of this knowledge.

2. Concepts of the audience

2.1 Mass communication research

Early research made on the media had been dominated by a concept constructed according to the “pessimistic mass society thesis” which had been elaborated by the Frankfurt School. Mass media which the Frankfurt School defines as a crucial part of the entire culture industry had been able to emerge and spread to perform a highly manipulative role in capitalist societies, “serving to contain and subvert forms of oppositional and critical consciousness on behalf of the dominant capitalist class.” Implicit in the Frankfurt School model was a “hypodermic” notion of the media, which were seen as having the power to “inject” its ideology into the mass consciousness:

“The image of the mass communication process entertained by researchers had been, firstly, one of “an atomistic” mass of millions of readers, listeners and movie-goers, prepared to receive the message; and secondly [...] every message (was conceived of) as a direct and powerful stimulus to action which would elicit immediate response.”

5 Szkudlarek, Television as Adult Pedagogy: Learning Consumerism, Dreaming Democracy, p. 72
6 O´Sullivan et al., Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies, p. 124
7 Katz/Lazarsfeld, dickcldkcd
Since this model did not take into account that the respective audiences are actually constructed in heterogeneously, thus does not represent a monolithic mass, it would soon be partly rejected by post-war American researchers working on television reception. Its cultural pessimism along with its one-way information flow (one has to consider that the inventors of the culture industry thesis, Horkheimer and Adorno, had to leave Nazi-Germany which radicalises this linear structure to the phenomenon of propaganda) “didn’t accurately reflect the pluralistic nature of American society; it was – to put it shortly – sociological naive”\(^8\), as David Morley claims.

Referring to communication models conceiving of audiences as simple receivers of messages, Len Masterman sums up that “this research has generated few positive results largely because of the difficulties of separating out the influence of communications from the influence of other phenomena, such as the family, the peer group, opinion leaders and so on.”\(^9\)

Although one can agree that the economic and the political structure found within a society cannot serve not only as a necessary, but even a sufficient explanation for cultural and ideological practises, it is far too easy to estimate this model as an entirely naive one, which is risked when entirely rejecting this model.

Firstly, this would disregard the historical background in which the culture industry thesis had been developed. Secondly, it still serves as a fruitful contribution to the analysis of patterns of persuasion which thirdly re-adapt the shape of propaganda in crucial, that is, war situations, a point which cannot be stressed here.

\(^8\) Morley, Television Audience Research: A Critical History, p. 46
\(^9\) Masterman, Teaching The Media, p. 215
2.2 Uses and Gratifications

In order to explain the relation between media output and its social effects for a pluralistic society such as the American one, the notion of a direct and hypodermic effect of mass persuasion was exchanged by a pattern which included culturalistic and functionalistic paradigms: As early as 1946, Robert Merton´s research referring to the trigger phrase model developed by Social psychology pointed out that “the message cannot adequately be interpreted if it is severed from the cultural context in which it occurred”.

Moreover, within these mainly quantitative and positivistic methods, it was estimated that the media audience did not consist of an atomistic mass but a variety of groups. Within these social formations, the individual would rather shape its opinion through the exchange within the group (which, deliberately, was formed by the sharing of the same socio-cultural backgrounds of the members) than be influenced by the persuasive strategies of the media.

Thus, a shift from a total top-down flow of communication towards a rather bottom-up selection of information supply proceeded in media research: From this point of view, it is not possible to equate content and effect. Katz argued “that the approach crucially assumed that even the most potent of mass media content cannot ordinarily influence an individual who has no ‘use’ for it in the social and psychological context in which he lives. The uses approach assumes that people’s values, their interests ... associations, social roles, are pre-potent, and that people selectively fashion what they see and hear”.

This paradigmatic shift was overtaken by British media research which then would develop the uses and gratifications model. Emphasising an active audience, this model supposes that individuals consuming media output are seeking for gratification they can derive from what they are

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10 Morley, Television, Audience, and Cultural Studies, p. 48
11 Morley, Television, Audience, and Cultural Studies, p. 49
offered, so that issues which do not seem to provide any use to the respective ‘selector’ would not be regarded, that is, watched on TV, let alone influence his opinion or his behaviour. What was suggested was that media could offer gratification in four varying ways:

- to divert from everyday and work routines
- to enable personal relationships by keeping in touch and
- to contribute to self-formation of the individual by confirming, adjusting and challenging his self-notion and
- to provide the individual with local and distant information which may influence his life and lifestyle

This notion, of course, allows the media consumer to freely choose from a range which is unlimited: Whatever may be offered to him cannot be estimated to be used in a predictable way. This, however, would mean that any given sort of media output could be decoded in the way the supplier would like it to be seen as well as in entirely oppositional terms, thus could even contribute to the formation of an opinion which then would be somewhat diachronic to the former intentions.

2.3 Encoding – Decoding

The weakness of the uses and gratifications approach lies in the latter: Actually, the model is more or less taking for granted or neglecting the content of the messages; what is underestimated here is that certain meanings are preferred by the sender of mass media.

For these meanings are influencing the way in which information is mediated, the structure itself will limit the field in which the activity of the

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12 see O’Sullivan et al., Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies, p. 326
13 as Klapper puts it: Persuasive communications function far more frequently as an agent of reinforcement than as an agent of change ... reinforcement, or at least constancy of opinion, is typically found to be the dominant effect (Morley, Television Audience Research: A Critical History, p. 48)
audience can proceed. Moreover, the variations of the possible receptions are put in to a range of values which is constructed by ideology. Thus, to speak of an individual using its own discretion has to be rejected. Deriving from structuralism and neo-Marxist theories, cultural studies hence replace “the notion of the individual with that of the subject. (...) What cultural studies are concerned with, of course, is the sense of self that we, as individuals, experience. This constructed sense of the individual in a network of social relations is what is referred to as ‘the subject.’ (...) Our subjectivity, then, is the product of social relations that work upon us in three main ways, through society, through language or discourse, and through the psychic processes through which the infant enters into society, language and consciousness. Our subjectivity is not inherent in our individuality, our difference from other people, rather it is the product of the various social agencies to which we are subject, and thus is what we share with others.”

The Encoding-Decoding model introduced by Stuart Hall was the first and most crucial semiological attempt to overcome this lack of structuralism and the overestimation of the openness of messages which is found in the earlier semiological approaches:

“As Hall puts it, Polysemy [that is, the capability to signify multiple meanings] must not be confused with pluralism. Connotative codes are not equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its segmentations (...) its classifications of the (...) world upon its members. There remains a dominant cultural order, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested.”

Hall claims that the process of communicative exchange is divided into two sections, as “(...) the moments of 'encoding' and 'decoding', though only 'relatively autonomous' in relation to the communicative process as a whole, are determinate moments. (...) The consumption or reception of the television message is thus also itself a 'moment' of the production

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14 Fiske, Television Culture, p. 48f
15 Hall 1973a, 13
process in its larger sense, though the latter is 'predominant' because it is the point of departure for the realization of the message."\(^\text{16}\)

Since the structured and encoded message has to be decoded, that is, filled up with meaning by the respective audience, it is possible that the contents of the two sides which are "(...) 'meaning structures 1' and 'meaning structures 2' may not be the same. The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. (...) What are called 'distortions' or 'misunderstandings' arise precisely from the lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange."\(^\text{17}\)

This, as a matter of course, is also virulent if educationally intentioned issues are broadcast. For instance, programmes aiming to have a learning effect such as education programmes should consider this two-dimensional process in which misunderstandings derive from a decoding that is different from the encoding.

Moreover, the 'predominant moment', as Hall calls it, cannot be overestimated. Education has to be aware of the different adaptations the reading process can have: The intentions that are laid down in the messages that are put into the communicative exchange by the 'encoder' can be entirely accepted by the individual receiving and reading the message which Hall calls operating inside the dominant-hegemonic position:

"When the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, say, a television newscast or current affairs programme full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say that the viewer is operating inside the dominant code."\(^\text{18}\)

On the other side, the reading process might be evoking an entire rejection of the intentions which thus is called oppositional reading. Most of the reading processes, however, will oscillate between these extremes and shape a negotiated reading.

\(^{16}\) Hall, Encoding, Decoding, p. X
\(^{17}\) ibid., p. XY
\(^{18}\) ibid., p. YX
As Hall puts it, “decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations, while, at amore restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rule.”19

The reader thus 'deals with' the information he is provided with and filters out what he can accept and what he cannot agree with. As notions such as negotiation, agreement and rejection are crucial to the discourse, this will prove that any sort of media reception is a selective process which forces, verifies/falsifies, completes, scrutinizes etc. the personal experiences of the viewer - and thus will have a learning effect. A qualification in the use of media will be helpful to diminish the 'lacks of equivalence'. However, it should not aim to narrow the interpretative range:

“It is the purpose of media education to provide students with the media competencies which will enable them to explicate the encoded text as fully as possible. What remains open is the audience’s and the students’ interpretation and acceptance of this text.”20

The student’s as well as any other audience member’s capability of understanding and analysing the media output critically is based to a great extent on his ethnographical background: Age, class, gender/sexuality, race, peer group, nation and ethnicity are the most crucial points that construct the personal identity and as well the collective identities in which shared meanings can occur. As Stanley Fish puts it, reading is not an entirely individual but a fundamentally social process, since the reader himself is constructed:

“The self is a social construct whose operations are delimited by the systems of intelligibility that inform it.”21

This means that “differences in interpretation arise from differences in the assumptions that underlie different ‘interpretive communities’, rather than

19 ibid., p. YY
20 Masterman, Teaching The Media, p. 219
21 Fish, Is There a Text in This Class?, p. 335
from differences between individuals. What appears to the reader as his or her individual imposition of meaning is actually the result of a system of belief and resultant interpretive strategies he or she shares (usually unknowingly) with a larger community of readers.\textsuperscript{22}

2.4 Activated texts – activated readers

However, Halls encoding-decoding model turned out to overemphasise “the role of class in producing different readings and had underestimated the variety of determinants of readings.”\textsuperscript{23} Referring to David Morley’s investigation on different classes watching the news programme Nationwide which could prove that similarities in watching and reading the programme are not limited to the respective social group but in entirely different ones,\textsuperscript{24} Fiske suggests that “\textit{(…)} It is more productive to think \textit{(…)} of structures of preference in the text that seek to prefer some meanings and close others off. This \textit{(…)} sees the text as a structured polysemy, as a potential of unequal meanings, some of which are preferred over, or proffered more strongly than, others, and which can only be activated by socially situated viewers in a process of negotiation between the text and their social situation.”\textsuperscript{25}

This activation (a point which is, of course, crucial if any sort of learning process is to be generated), however, can only be established if the given, that is, the television text, is popular. As John Fiske points out, popular texts have to be incomplete and challenge his own opinions to be meaningful to its readers. These “producerly” texts can only be useful to people if they leave gaps which, then, in the process of reading, can be filled with “text” derived from the reader’s personal and social experiences and be negotiated according to these:

\textsuperscript{22} Allen, Reader-Oriented Criticism and Television, p. 100
\textsuperscript{23} Fiske, Television Culture, p. 63
\textsuperscript{24} see ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Fiske, Television Culture, p. 65
“To be popular with a diversity of audiences television must both provoke its readers to the production of meanings and pleasures, and must provide the textual space for these meanings and pleasures to be articulated with the social interests of the readers.”

By leaving out those gaps, Fiske claims, the so-called tertiary texts can be established in rather effective terms. Whilst primary texts are the respective television programmes, romances etc. and secondary texts are articles and reports about the respective primary pieces of work, tertiary texts consist of discussions and conversations audience members are having about the topics which are dealt, along with attempts to personally influence these and to contribute to the textual production:

As soap opera research points out, many of the programmes have to respect and include suggestions made by their, primarily feminine, viewers to guarantee the maintenance of the programme.

In her research topic “Reading The Romance”, Janice Radway remarks:

“The romance boom could not continue to the extent it has were not thousands of women producing their own manuscripts and mailing them off regularly to Harlequin, Silhouette and Candlelight [American publishers of romance literature]. Whether the satisfaction they derive from this activity ever prompts them to demand changes outside the privatized family environment is impossible to say but I am not willing to rule out the possibility. Indeed positive political strategies might be developed from the recognition that the practises of romance writing and reading continue, that they are fluid and actively being changed by both writers and readers, and that their final effects can neither be foreseen nor guaranteed in advance.”

Doing research on soap opera, Carlotte Brunsdon tried to sort out “how female viewers are capable of reading and enjoying soap operas, a capability which she locates in the specific cultural competencies women

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26 ibid., p. 83
27 Radway, Reading the Romance, p. 17
have, that is, their familiarity with the narrative structure of the soap opera genre, their knowledge of soap opera characters and their sensitivity to codes of conduct of personal life and interpersonal relationships.”

Masterman points out that this mutual relation does not hold good for television reception alone, thus, as he emphasises, is significant for classical pedagogy as well:

“(…) If meaning resides, not within the text, but in the interaction between audiences and text, then this holds true not simply in front of the television screen, but within every classroom. For teachers of all subjects, knowledge of and sensibility to what students themselves bring to a subject will be at least as important as knowledge of and sensitivity to the subject itself. (…) The transformation of students, from being passive recipients of the communications of others to active meaning-makers – from objects to whom education happens, to subjects who create knowledge and make it their own – should be liberating for students and teachers alike and should help to promote the development of genuine dialogue within the classroom.”

What is at stake here is the point that within these mutually influencing structures of reading and writing/producing popular texts, possibilities and potentials apparently exist which just need activating, considering a significant fact: pleasure.

3. The concept of pleasure and its use for education

If people do feel comfortable with the “task” they have to work on, their activation will surely be easier initiated than in situations where the existence of pleasure is not given. This, however, would certainly lead to a rejection rather than an adoption of the programme:

28 Ang, Living Room Wars, p. 20
29 Masterman, Teaching The Media, p. 218
“The problem is that in televisual discourse `informative´ programmes, especially when they are about `serious´ politics and culture, are too often constructed as the important – and thus unpleasurable – which viewers are supposed to watch because it is `good for them´. (...) Of course, it is not true that the traditional organizations don´t make use of the pleasure as a working principle for the creating audience involvement. However, from their point of view, pleasure in itself is not enough. It even seems to be something dirty to them. They mostly seem to claim that to give more than simple pleasure, thereby marginalizing the pleasure in itself and making it instrumental to the overall `pedagogic´ framework of their programming.”

As a matter of course, to consider “pleasure” to the extent mentioned above in a programme which intends to educate people might occasionally be problematic, if not impossible. What is at stake here is the point that the circumstances in which people are willing to interact are often neglected. If pleasure is such a crucial part of the accumulation of knowledge, it should not be left out, otherwise the audience will not be reached and surely be lost to commercial suppliers. As Ien Ang puts it,

“(...) As long as popular desires and preferences are merely seen as negatives which have to be overcome or as an alibi for placing audiences in a paternalist framework, and as long as the pleasurable itself is not taken seriously as something to be actively constructed, the agents of commercialism will be (...) the laughing third.”

This activation which is, of course, a sign for the interest people show for certain programmes, may clearly be profitable for a pedagogy which intends to include these every day learning processes. People showing such an engagement in a media topic as well as any sort of issue in

30 Ang, Living Room Wars, p. 31
31 Ang, Living Room Wars, p. 33
32 see Thoma, Medienkompetenz: Der Schlüssel zur Informationsgesellschaft, p. 93:
„Wenn die Lehrer schon feststellen müssen, dass sie den Fernsehkonsum ihrer Zöglinge nicht unterbinden können, sollten sie sich auf denselben einlassen und ihn für die eigenen Bildungszwecke nutzen.“
popular culture accumulate a knowledge which is meaningful for their lives, though it usually does not bring them an economic profit: “Such popular cultural capital, unlike official cultural capital, is not typically convertible into economic capital (...).

Acquiring it will not enhance one’s career [as adult education programmes, especially profession-oriented, aims to do], nor will it produce upward class mobility as its investment payoffs. Its dividends lie in the pleasures and esteem of one’s peers in a community of taste rather than those of one’s social betters. Fans, then, are a good example of Bourdieu’s 'autodidacts' – the self-taught who often use their self-acquired knowledge and taste to compensate for the perceived gap between their actual (or official) cultural capital, as expressed in educational qualifications and the socio-economic rewards they bring, and what they feel are their true desserts.”

Referring to Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital and it by including into it forms of popular cultural capital, Fiske wants to show that besides the official notions of what makes relevant culture that has to be accumulated as well as economic capital in order to gain social privileges, people can make use of their interests and generate a certain knowledge. Fiske remarks:

“Fans, in particular, are active producers and users of such cultural capital and, at the level of fan organization, begin to reproduce equivalents of the formal institutions of official culture.”

This means that an activation on the side of the message decoders, which, of course, the users of these items of popular culture are, is even more fortified if a high interest in personal engagement exists. For the described case of fandom, this is all too clear to see. But for other cases this may hold good as well. If texts - thus, programmes which intend to educate

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33 Fiske, The Cultural Economy Of Fandom, p. 34
34 Fiske, The Cultural Economy of Fandom, p. 33
35 Fiske points out that “Fandom (...) selects from the repertoire of mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment”, items which underlie the structure of capital circulation and thus are filled with ideological meanings that have to be read.
are concerned as well – are structured according to these aspects, popularity, openness, its viewers shall enforce their engagement. As Anthony Kaye suggests for the case of multi-media education, the communication structure of the media used should be overtaken:

“Multi-media education projects – whether functional or examination-oriented – should exploit [sic] to a maximum the popular communication styles of radio, television and the press, thus removing possible psychological barriers to access.”36

4. Conclusion

As I aimed to point out, a gap is existing between current media research and pedagogy which aims to use the media as an instrument of education. The latter continues to use the obsolete linear communication models, whereas media research has, influenced, if not dominated by cultural studies, tried to establish communication models which consider the audiences as non-homogenous and active, negotiating participants of the communication exchange and determinants in meaning production. Comparable decoding will occur mainly if people share the same socio-cultural backgrounds and interests. To generate this interest, John Fiske remarks that texts have to underlie the codes of popularity, a phenomenon which is to be found especially in the case of fandom subcultures which are even capable to produce its own sort of cultural capital.

It is, as a matter of course, rather difficult to include all of these aspects in education. However, to know how current media research defines the process of reception and meaning production can no longer be neglected.

36 Kaye, Using the Media for Adult Basic Education, p. 26
Len Masterman sums up that “the important insight that audiences perform their own ideological operations on texts needs to be integrated into media teaching at all levels”\(^{37}\) which, as I suppose, should be the next step:

- Teachers need to develop a sensitive and close working knowledge of the cultural competencies and sub-cultural differences, so that they can predict with some accuracy the range of responses which a particular text is likely to elicit.
- This understanding should (...) also inform student responses, and give to students a greater awareness of the social and sub-cultural roots of their own judgements.
- This understanding needs to be transferred to the responses of audiences to media texts generally. Teachers and students alike will need to widen their examination of media texts to include an analysis of the sense which is made of them by their audiences.\(^{38}\)

To understand how people make use of the media and to include this into education, along with the intention to make transparent to the audiences and students as well how these processes are generated and are thus not natural, but socially and ideologically constructed\(^{39}\) has to be established immediately. Otherwise, the risk of falling behind a field of studies that is updated as continuously - as it is the case in media studies - will be run even more in the future.

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\(^{37}\) Masterman, Teaching The Media, p. 220

\(^{38}\) see Masterman, Teaching The Media, p. 220

\(^{39}\) ibid.
5. References:


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