Post-Modern Theory and Nordic Media Research

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When Baudrillard’s theory of implosion, Foucault’s theory of power, Barthes’ theory of the pleasure of the text, and Eco’s theory of viewers’ semiotic guerilla warfare began to gain currency in Finland in the early 1980s, they all looked like Salvation from the straitjackets of critical Marxism and affirmative empiricism. Good-bye, political economics! Good-bye, statistical analysis! Welcome, ‘against-the-method’!

I was already cultural editor at Helsingin Sanomat, but on the side I was also editor for the Finnish journal of mass communication research, Tiedustustutkimus, and this new spirit of anything goes was indeed exciting, even though it hardly gained much ground in our editorial board or in the Finnish research community at large. But it did mean that researchers no longer had to follow the traditional liturgy of academic research. We no longer necessarily had to consult vast, statistically representative samples, a case study or two might do just fine. We no longer had to quote Marx, but we all learned to spout French nouns, common and proper, instead. We were freed from ponderous Marxist terminology, but the new jargon could be no less cryptic.

As we all know, post-Modernism is an ambiguous concept. We are not agreed as to whether it refers to a new theory of society, a new and distinct form of social organization, or a new aesthetics – or is it perhaps no more than a new version of our old social order, our old theory, our old aesthetic.

Whatever the case, post-Modernism is said to have had patent effects on the cultural level, even if it may be an outgrowth of changes in the organization of production. Lyotard (1979) characterized the post-Modern condition in terms of a fundamental mistrust of the ‘Grand Narratives’ (les grands récits) of western civilization, whereas Lash (1990) sees it as a special ‘regime of signification’. Both define it as a phenomenon belonging to the realm of ideas or cultural expression. “Post-Modernism is, for me, strictly cultural,” Lash declares (1990:4).

But what does post-Modernism mean to the media? And what impact has it had in the field of mass communication research in the Nordic countries in particular?

There are, one might say, two ‘grands récits’ in post-Modern television research. The first states that receivers are always ‘active’, and the second, that media content is polysemic, i.e., open to multiple interpretations and even valuations (cf. Morley 1992:18). But here I should like to try briefly to outline the relation of post-Modernism to three interrelated foci of research: (1) the media audience, (2) media institutions, and (3) media content.

As I see it, post-Modernism has run into problems in all three areas. First of all, it has uncritically celebrated a new, ‘active’ media audience or ‘readership’ of media texts, whereby individuals, families, subcultures, etc., all produce their own meanings, ‘significations’. Secondly, post-Modernism...
nism has neglected to analyse the steady growth and growing power of leading media institutions. And, third, it has sung the praises of mass culture, denying any qualitative differences of an aesthetic nature between genres.

The Active Reader

Recent television research has stressed the competence of the viewer, his/her active choice of programmes and independent power of interpretation and signification. Whereas critical media research tended to concentrate on the power of the cultural industry, top-bottom, research today seems to stress the resistance of the public, bottom-top, as Jen Ang characterizes it (1990:246).

John Fiske (1987, 1989) is perhaps the greatest proponent of such a voluntaristic conception of mass communication when he declares his intention to replace the perspective of the producer of goods with that of the viewer or 'reader': "Programs are produced, distributed and defined by the industry: texts are the product of their readers," he writes (1987:13-14).

Parallel with Fiske's Manifesto of the Liberated Reader and the polysemy or multiplicity of meaning in television, Finnish media researcher Dan Steinbock (1985) has argued that 'macro-control' is superseded by 'micro-control', the 'aesthetic of the screen' by the 'aesthetic of the remote control', and 'top-bottom' programme scheduling by 'bottom-top' programme choices.

Graham Murdock (1991:61) sees the transition from structural-institutional research to reception analysis, which seeks to interpret the viewing practice, meaning production and satisfaction of the audience and stresses 'semiotic democracy', as an expression of 'the return of the subject' to the social sciences. According to this new school of thought, the subject is no longer only an agent who carries out tasks ordered by 'the structure', but a true actor, who possesses a wealth of practical knowledge and skills and can operate relatively independent of his/her structural framework.

This shift has been an important corrective to exaggerated conceptions of the power of media institutions. Still, much reception analysis is overly optimistic in its assessment of the interpretive discretion and autonomy of the public, as if the media exerted no influence whatsoever.

Turning to reception research in the Nordic countries specifically, I am not aware of any 'overdoses' of voluntarism. Here in the North we have combined sociological, psychological and semiological conceptions, and applied 'conventional' statistical together with 'post-Modern' ethnographic methods or text analysis (cf. Dahlgren 1986; Höijer 1990; Höijer et al. 1992; Jensen 1986; Schröder 1988a, 1988b, i.a.) in ways that suggest a certain convergence of disciplines as well as paradigms (cf. Jensen 1987; Jensen & Rosengren 1990; Schröder 1987).

The sociological bent has been particularly strong in Finnish reception research. Alasruuari (1991, 1993) has analysed the imminent rules and value hierarchies of television culture using both qualitative and quantitative methods (see also Eskola 1991; Kytömäki 1991, i.a.). Finns have also explored the relation between class-based lifestyles and media use (cf. Erämetsä 1990; Roos 1989), i.a.).

In my view, reception research here in the North has mostly represented a strategy for the enrichment of either sociologically or humanistically inclined television research. There has been little romanticizing of 'the reader' (or viewer).

The Power of Media Institutions

On the structural level, the past few years have witnessed processes of globalization and transnationalization, coupled with commercialization and the deregulation of communication systems. International production companies have extended their dominance over the market for television content, and national public service broadcast-
ing institutions find themselves in a critical period of transition in the face of technical and economic developments which have opened up thousands of new television channels.

Due to their preoccupation with the interpretation of media texts and of viewers' interpretation of media texts, post-Modern communication research approaches have failed to analyse these fundamental changes. One might say that post-Modernism has led researchers to give priority to analysing the production of meaning rather than the production of content, and micro-analysis instead of macro. Or, as John Fiske (1989:4) expresses the rationale:

Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the industry. All the culture industry can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formations of the people to use or reject in the ongoing process of producing their popular culture.

This kind of "don't worry, be happy"-approach (cf. Morley 1992:11), which thus operates on the micro-level and 'bottom-up', does not take account of the institutional and structural aspects of communication. As Hoyer (1991:49-50) notes, such studies are unable to explain how programme tableaux and programme content come to be. Or, as Ang (1990:247) puts it:

... revalidating the popular alone by stressing the obvious empirical fact that audiences are active meaning producers and imaginative pleasure seekers can become a banal form of cultural critique if the popular itself is not seen in a thoroughly social and political context. In other words, audiences may be active in myriad ways in using and interpreting media, but it would be utterly out of perspective to cheerfully equate 'active' with 'powerful', in the sense of 'taking control' at an enduring, structural or institutional level. ... we must not lose sight of the marginality of this power.

That is to say, even if viewers can produce meanings, and even if media texts are polysemic, it is nonetheless the media industry which dictates programme output, thereby setting the framework for viewers' meaning production, and thus, in the final analysis, exerting power (see also Ang 1991:163).

This criticism is more applicable to North American cultural studies than to Nordic European media research. Here in the Nordic countries we seem firmly rooted in the traditions of critical Marxism and empirical sociology. Even our humanistically founded reception studies and text analyses generally do not lose sight of the institutional context of meaning production.

Nordic mass media research has a firm foundation in the academic disciplines of Sociology and Political Science, alongside the research departments of public service broadcasting institutions. This may be what has given us such a strong tradition of structural-institutional research, which in recent years has concentrated on changes in the media structure with particular attention to the transformation of public service broadcasting (cf. Gustafsson 1993; Hellman, 1988, 1990; Hellman & Sauri 1994; Hellman & Soramäki 1994; Sepstrup 1990; Silvo 1988; Syvertsen 1992, i.a.).

The study of communication structures has in fact formed a cornerstone of mainstream as well as critical research in the Nordic countries all along.

Aesthetic Values

"Instead of a single centre there is pastiche, cultural recombination. Anything can be juxtaposed to anything else." So writes Todd Gitlin (1989:350) of the new 'post-Modern' culture and its products.

Rock video and MTV in particular are commonly touted as prime examples of post-Modernism. "In a postmodernist fashion,"
writes E. Ann Kaplan (1987:144), "MTV blurs previous distinctions between past, present and future, along with its blurring of separations such as those between popular and avant-garde art, between different aesthetic genres and artistic modes."

Outside academia there seems to be widespread acceptance of the anything goes relativist of post-Modernism, and it is no longer necessary to discuss quality or to apply coherent systems of criteria to works of popular culture.

At the same time, within research, text analyses having their focus on popular genres have in recent years promoted a qualitative relativism which seeks to equate all genres, mass and high culture alike. The post-structuralist critique has sought to demonstrate how even popular texts are aesthetically complex and require many forms of cultural competence of their ‘readers’. Meanwhile, in the politico-economic sphere, we are experiencing a wave of populism which extols the value of spontaneous choice and consumer preferences. We find the same populist tendencies in researchers: they have abandoned their role as critical outsiders to become accomplices, ‘fans’ of popular culture (Ang 1990), or, as Tania Modleski (1986:11) writes:

If the problem with some of the work of the Frankfurt School was that its members were too far outside the culture they examined, critics today seem to have the opposite problem: immersed in their culture, half in love with their subject, they sometimes seem unable to achieve the proper critical distance from it. As a result, they may unwittingly wind up writing apologies for mass culture and embracing its ideology.

Here in the North, Jostein Gripsrud (1991) is among the staunchest defenders of universal criteria of quality and aesthetic value, but even he allows that texts within one genre should be primarily measured against standards specific to that genre, i.e. be measured against each genre’s own tradition. Genres are at a basic level incommensurable (Gripsrud 1991:235).

Whereas Gripsrud considers quality a characteristic of the text, Kim Schrøder (1992) offers an alternative view, denying the quality of the text per se:

The text itself has no existence, no life, and therefore no quality until it is deciphered by an individual and triggers the meaning potential carried by this individual. Whatever criteria one wishes to set up for quality, therefore, must be applied not to the text itself, but to the readings actualised by the text in audience members (Schrøder 1992:207).

Schrøder recognizes no universal quality, but only quality for someone. Schrøder’s example is Dynasty, which he finds can arouse both ethical, aesthetic and ecstatic responses in its viewers and thus may be said to have cultural significance or value for the receiver in question.

Gripsrud is out to ‘modernize’ traditional, hierarchical Modernism, yet cleaves to general, socially founded criteria of value. Schrøder’s mission is to ‘postmodernize’, to abandon those same criteria and normative principles. Schrøder’s ‘democratic’ or ‘post-Modern’ objective, to legitimize all tastes, is a worthy one; he campaigns for pluralism and diversity and acceptance of cultural differences. But I also sympathize with Gripsrud’s cultural-political position: even if we are accepting of cultural differences, we still need aesthetic, text-based criteria of value otherwise commercialism, i.e., the market and market demand, will reign supreme (cf. Gripsrud 1991:229).

It is in the contention over concepts of quality that we Nordic media researchers have verged furthest toward the post-Modern position. But the ‘anything goes’ philosophy is still not taken to heart. We are only halfway to post-Modernism.
Convergence and Courtship

I have a great deal of sympathy for those researchers who have tried to dampen the general enthusiasm about post-Modernism (see Goodwin 1992; Morley 1992; Murdock 1991, i.a.). What has been labelled such is perhaps more precisely a case of intersemiotics, i.e., a concept used to describe the circumstance that statements formulated in one context are interpreted in another, different context – as Finnish sociologist Risto Heiskala (1993) explicates the somewhat problematic term.

'Post-Modernism' may merely be an aesthetic style in literature, architecture, the visual arts, and so forth whereas the institutional foundation of Modernism and the cornerstones of Modern society industrialization, the market economy, our system of justice, etc. prevail. On this institutional plane it may be more accurate to speak of 'High' Modernism rather than 'post-'.

A propos the chronological dimension, post-Modernism seems ignorant of the fact that the 'intersemiotic' condition is nothing new, that mixtures and crossings of cultures and contexts are virtually as old as human culture itself.

In research it is important that we take care not to splinter the text into its various readings, a danger Gripsrud (1989) has cautioned against. But neither may television be reduced to a purely textual phenomenon; parallel with the semiology of television we do indeed need the sociology of television, as Morley (1992:6) points out. Perhaps we should go even farther and "conceptualise the relation between [the] two sides of the communication process the material and the discursive, the economic and the cultural without collapsing either one into the other," as Murdock (1989:436) describes the task.

In methodological terms this means rejecting the hegemony of any one Method, be it qualitative or quantitative, or ethnographic, statistical or historical analysis. In the final analysis choice of methodology is a pragmatic question, depending on the question at hand and what we hope to achieve by answering it.

As I said earlier, mass communication researchers in the Nordic countries have been onlookers rather than post-Modern activists. Post-Modernism has been a major liberation movement, but its most important effect, as I see it, has been not so much the introduction of new, post-Modern 'schools' of research, but changes in the various existing camps. Post-Modernism represented an antithesis to the established theses; the result has been a synthesis or convergence between new and old schools (cf. Ang 1990; Curran 1990; Høyer 1990; Jensen 1987; Jensen & Rosengren 1990; Pietilä et al. 1990; Schröder 1987).

Cultural studies, which came to Norway and Denmark via the Humanities, but to Sweden and Finland via Sociology, has only plucked a few raisins out of the post-Modern cake, but the old paradigms have largely proven immune or perhaps highly resistant? The result has been an ongoing courtship, or even polygamy, between cultural research, empiricism and the relics of critical Marxism, which, in my opinion, is what makes media research so fascinating today.

References


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