

Popular Passages Media in the Modern Space of Consumption

Populära Passager: Medierna i det moderna konsumtionsrummet

Johan Fornäs

Karin Becker

Erling Bjurström

Hillevi Ganetz

The culture of shopping formed in the modern arenas of consumption has an unstable status. From various positions within political, cultural and social life, the culture of consumption is criticised for seducing, blinding, and stupefying its passive participants. But how does this actually work? What roles do media play in the processes of consumption? Are there better, sharper arguments to support the critiques? Or are there perhaps important and valuable social and cultural relationships being developed behind the facade of commercialisation? What are the meanings of those acts that appear irrational, aimless or economically wasteful? Are they perhaps goal-oriented and satisfying, even productive? What tensions are concealed within the communicative acts and encounters that form this central aspect of contemporary daily life?

The research project *Popular Passages: Media in the Modern Consumption Space* explores the processes of media consumption, from the places of purchase where popular media commodities of various kinds and genres meet their customers, to their uses in everyday life. This is done through ethnographic studies of the routes of certain media products with their consumers from a specific shopping centre to other contexts of use. One source of inspiration is the German philosopher Walter Benjamin's famous 'Arcades Project' from the 1930's. Its analyses of city, commerce, modernity and media culture have inspired some themes in our present 'Passages Project'.

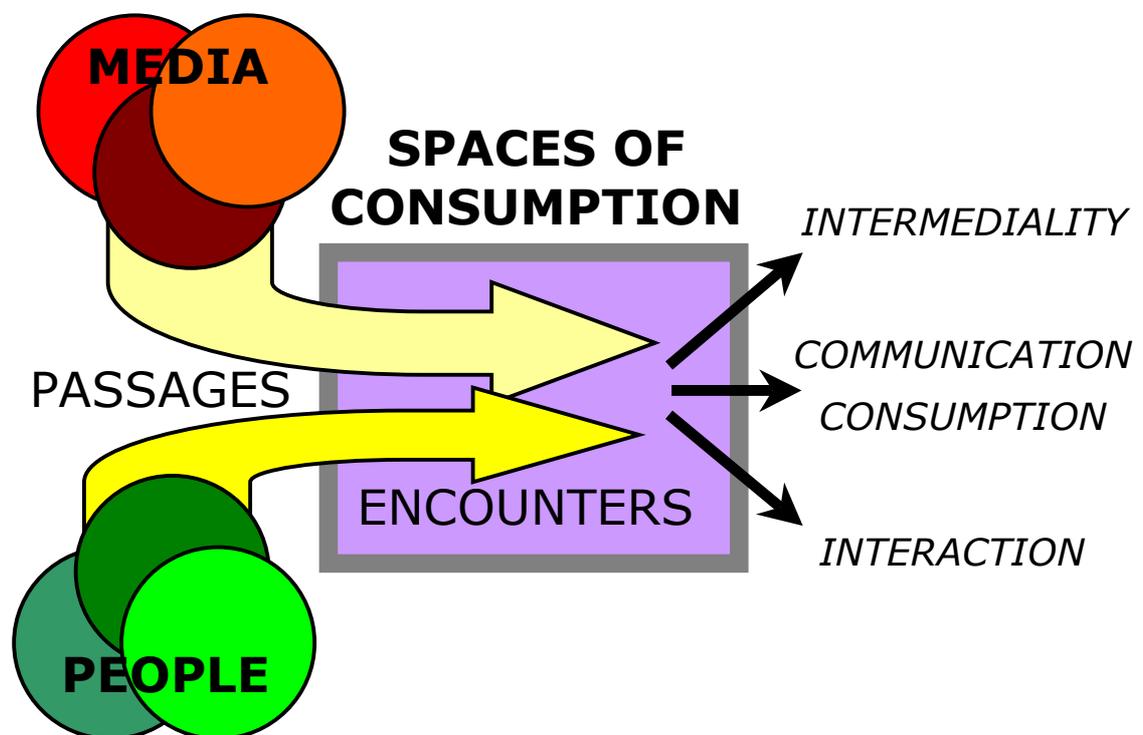
Typically, media and popular culture in late modernity are commodified, as cultural industries distribute their products via the market to their users. The project uses a cultural perspective to study the process of media *consumption*, that is the acquisition and use of commodities, including whether and how the satisfaction they promise is fulfilled. This consumption is always simultaneously a production – of experiences, meaning, identity, relations, difference, communities and even new symbolic expressions (in conversation or aesthetic practice). In this study, a shopping centre provides the arena for examining a broad spectrum of media products and their spread to consumers.

In late modern society, *media* are present in almost every human activity. The project employs media ethnography to analyse how different media are marketed, consumed and used in

different private and public spaces and spheres. It studies how borders are drawn between media, forms of expression and genres, and how the polysemic and contested concept of popular culture is defined differently in various contexts. Where and how is high distinguished from low, art from entertainment? How to balance between traditional critiques of popular genres and a more positive evaluation of their pleasurable or even emancipatory traits? A series of empirical studies will offer a wider understanding of the meanings of mediated culture, in an historical situation of increasing complexity and reformulations of the borders between 'high' and 'low'.

A specific *shopping centre* provides the prismatic focus and starting point for empirical studies. Using ethnographic methods and modes of textual analysis, the shopping centre is being examined as a social environment, where a broad spectrum of media forms are found not only in shops but throughout the shopping centre's public and private spaces. From this point specific media are selected and followed into their private or public contexts of use.

Here, two interwoven types of *passages* take place. On the one hand, media products and texts flow through this space and 'through' the people who populate it. On the other hand, people in their turn move through this space and 'through' the media that saturate it. The blending of these passages gives rise to three types of interactive *encounters*. People and media meet in processes of use and interpretation. Media consumption also brings people into contact with each other, from entering into conversation to forming public communities and private relations. Finally, mediated texts meet each other, in a complex web of intertextual references, constellations and collisions.



The project proceeds in a series of steps each resulting in a published volume:

- *Communicative action/shopping: Cultural perspectives on media and consumption* (*Det kommunikativa handlandet. Kulturella perspektiv på medier och konsumtion*, Nora: Nya Doxa 2000). This monograph charts relationships between cultural theories of consumption and of media use.
- *Passages: Media and culture in a shopping centre* (*Passager. Medier och kultur i ett köpcentrum*, Nora: Nya Doxa 2001). A study of a selected shopping centre's general profile, organisation and advertising, based on ethnographic fieldwork. This second book prismatically mirrors the consumption space as a media space.
- *Media and people in the space of consumption* (*Medier och människor i konsumtionsrummet*, Nora: Nya Doxa 2002). A series of studies explore the main media circuits that run through the various sections of the shopping centre to the uses of media commodities in everyday life. These studies engage a wide range of media forms such as photography, posters and cards, papers and magazines, books, records, video tapes, mobile phones and audio-visual hardware.
- *Contemporary ethnography: Reflections from the field of media consumption* (*Nutida etnografi. Reflektioner från mediekonsumtionens fält*, Nora: Nya Doxa 2004). Methodological reflections based on experiences from this unique collective media-ethnographic project.
- *Consuming Media: Communication, Shopping and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg 2007). A summarising monograph in English on media use as integrated practices of consumption and communication.

The whole Swedish book series can be ordered from the publisher.

Popular Passages: Media in the Modern Consumption Space is funded by The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond). It started in 1996 at the Department of Journalism, Media & Communication (JMK) at Stockholm University, but moved in 1999 to the National Institute of Working Life (NIWL) in Norrköping. In addition to the series of *reports* described above, an annual *seminar* is organised.

The project group co-operates in some of the steps, and includes a dozen *co-researchers* from media and communication, economic history, social anthropology and ethnology. A multi-disciplinary *reference group* provides further assistance. Those who have been involved in either of these functions are: Bosse Bergman, Dag Björkegren, Ulf Boëthius, Göran Bolin, Åsa Bäckström, Leonor Camauër, Peter Dahlgren, Kirsten Drotner, Cecilia von Feilitzen, Lena Gemzöe, Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, Martin Gustavsson, Anette Göthlund, Hasse Huss, Orsi Husz, André Jansson, Kjell Jonsson, Lars Kaijser, Sonja Kalmering, Martina Ladendorf, Lisbeth Larsson, Mats Lieberg, Marianne Liliequist, Ulf Lindberg, Orvar Löfgren, Karin Lövgren, Bo Reimer, Jonathan Schroeder, Ove Sernhede and Johan Söderberg.

Johan Fornäs, the project leader, is Professor of mediated culture at the Department of Culture Studies and Director of the Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden, Linköping University, Campus Norrköping. He has done research on popular music, youth, media and popular culture, his publications including *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity* (Sage 1995) and *Digital Borderlands: Cultural Studies of Identity and Interactivity on the Internet* (Peter Lang 2002).

Karin Becker is Professor at the Department of Culture Studies, Linköping University, and at JMK, Stockholm University. Her research subjects include an American 'commercial strip', a museum picture archive, expressions of ethnicity in a garden area. She has published texts on media photography and visual ethnography, and has led the projects 'Pictures in the Press' (1995-1999) and 'Visual Culture and Esthetic Learning' (2001-2002).

Erling Bjurström is Professor at the Department of Culture Studies at Linköping University. He has published studies of youth culture, popular music, advertising and social issues, including his dissertation on taste and style in Swedish youth culture: *Högt och lågt* ('High and low', Boréa 1997).

Hillevi Ganetz is Associate Professor and Researcher at the Centre for Gender Studies, Uppsala University. She has studied popular culture, youth culture, women, consumption and popular literature, including a dissertation on female Swedish rock lyrics: *Hennes röster* ('Her voices', Symposion 1997). Her current work includes a project on wildlife films on Swedish television and another on gender and popular music.

Contact: Johan Fornäs, forneas@acsis.liu.se