

## Methodological Reflections on Investigating the Reception of Fiction in Public Spaces

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**Katarina Eriksson Barajas,**

**"Methodological Reflections on Investigating the Reception of Fiction in Public Spaces"**

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**Abstract:** In her article "Methodological Reflections on Investigating the Reception of Fiction in Public Spaces" Katarina Eriksson Barajas discusses how to find and approach research participants in public spaces. Eriksson Barajas's study is based on tenets of the empirical study of literature. Reader response and reception theories and discursive psychology are both employed in the analysis. This approach, called discursive reception studies, enables researchers to analyze the role of social interaction in the co-construction of the experience of, in this case, a film or a play. Eriksson Barajas discusses the following methodological issues: 1) how to gain access to "naturally" occurring practices such as when people meet to talk at cafés after seeing a film together and during the intermissions at the theater and 2) how to record data on such practices. The results of Eriksson Barajas's study show that gaining access to participants in cinema settings is difficult, but not impossible.

## Katarina ERIKSSON BARAJAS

### Methodological Reflections on Investigating Reception of Fiction in Public Spaces

In the present article, I reflect on the process of locating and approaching cinema- and theater-goers and asking them to give their consent to participate in a study on talk about film and theater. Few discourse studies of naturally occurring data address how to find and approach participants in public spaces. There are many practical, hands-on guidelines for conducting a discourse analytic project. For example, Stephanie Taylor answers in detail the question of how to locate and select discourse analytic data and Douglas W. Maynard and Nora Cate Schaeffer discuss how an interviewer may try to recruit survey respondents over the phone. They suggest that an "optimistic" approach on the part of the interviewer is the most efficient method, particularly when it comes to answering questions about the length and purpose of the interview. Still, there is little research available on the question of how to find and approach participants in public spaces. Also receiving relatively little attention in methodological research on discourse analysis is the suitability of using recording equipment in various environments where filming in public space requires sensitivity, discretion and, in some cases, permission, as an additional consideration. I approach the objective of my study with tenets of the empirical study of literature and draw on reader response and reception theories and discursive psychology (see, e.g., Edwards and Potter). The principle of the research project can be summed up by quoting Rita Felski, who argues that "ordinary institutions are a valuable starting point for reflecting on why literature matters" and who underlines that literary criticism has to go beyond "what non-academic readers already know" (15). Cinemas and theaters are examples of ordinary institutions where people interact with different kinds of texts and Felski suggests that readers read "in the hope that [the book] will speak to them in the present" even if the book is an ancient classic ... We are sorely in need of richer and deeper accounts of how selves interact with texts" (11).

The most common place for using various kinds of fiction (books, films) is the home. For instance, in 2012, 82 percent of Swedes reported reading one book a year, 38 percent reported reading one book a week (see Brodén 10). Among cultural activities in the public sphere going to the cinema is the most common and 63 percent of Swedes report seeing a film at the cinema at least once a year, 27 percent once every quarter, and 40 of Swedes go to the theater once a year (see Brodén 15). Thus far, most research in the field has looked at interaction related to reading fiction and hence my question is what kind of methodology can we use to capture interaction related to film and theater and how can we understand such interaction? There is an emerging discourse analytic tradition in the research on responses to fiction (see, e.g., Allington and Swann). A classic study is Paul Atkinson's operatic ethnography on a touring opera company covering several years in which he presents a detailed empirical account of how opera performances as "cultural phenomena are produced and enacted" (198). The opera audience, however, was not specifically studied by Atkinson. With regard to the actual uses of fiction, some previous studies of naturally occurring responses, mainly on book reading, exist. For example, Daniel Allington analyzed online discussions of the *Lord of the Rings* films, literary training in undergraduate university studies and Allington and Joan Swann analyzed different kinds of reading groups: face-to-face, online, friendship-based or institutionalized. Bethan Benwell studied book groups reading a series of "diasporic" novels. Studies exist also about school-based reading groups (see Eriksson; Eriksson and Aronsson; Eriksson Barajas) and film discussions (see Eriksson Barajas). In line with Geoff Hall's suggestion, these studies strived to study "actual real world literary events" (21) in order to gain insights into needs for and uses of fiction. The ongoing book-club boom resulted in many studies, but there is a need for more research on different types of book clubs and for asking different kinds of questions. One such example is Daniel Allington's analysis of the relationship between cultural consumption, social status, and subcultural identity in a gay reading group. Other areas for collecting naturalistic reception data are Twitter, book blogs and internet-based fan fiction (see, e.g., Lindgren and Isaksson). Inspiration for gathering other kinds of naturally occurring data can be found in studies where participants are used as co-researchers. One example is Keri Facer's and Helen Manchester's study of people's learning lives and the role of personal data collection in life-long learning where participants themselves use different methods of documenting their everyday lives. Naturally, this kind of data collection may also prove to be challenging. In her study of bilingual couples' talk, Ingrid Piller describes how she had difficulty finding participants, but when she had found them and they agreed to participate, they returned empty recordings or recordings of a single conversation. After advertising for participants in bilingual interest publications, Piller was able to include enough couples that agreed to participate and were willing to record their conversations.

Following the arrival of the framework of the empirical study of literature in the 1980s, experimental methods such as protocols of "thinking aloud" while reading or viewing a film, rating tasks, tests of recall became a paradigm (see, e.g., Allington and Swann; for an overview and history of the empirical study of literature, see Schmidt <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1569>>; for a bibliography of the field see, Tötösy de Zepetnek <<https://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1115>>). In many cases, specially "textoids" (research texts) are used instead of texts or films people would actually choose to read and watch in everyday life. Hall called for additional studies on empirical data with ecological validity meaning studies whose findings are applicable to people's everyday life. The difference between using think-aloud protocols versus "natural" conversations about a film or a book lies not only in how data are collected, but also in the underlying epistemology. While think-aloud protocols attempt to capture inner, cognitive processes, scholars looking at recordings of social interaction aim to study practices and the structural resources participants use when only what is displayed interactionally is

considered (see, e.g., Potter and Hepburn). In my earlier studies I argue for the advantages of applying discursive psychology to reader response/reception data, because discursive psychology provides literary scholars with adequate tools for analyzing conversations (e.g., Eriksson Barajas; Eriksson Barajas and Aronsson). One benefit of using discursive psychology and discourse analysis when studying reception is that a detailed analysis of interaction shows how people construct a shared reading of literature (see, e.g., Fish).

Discursive psychology developed from a conversation analytic approach to focus on social interaction. A key feature of discursive psychology is that the researcher treats text and talk as social practices (see, e.g., Edwards and Potter). The research questions investigated in discursive psychology are of the type "how is X done?" (see Potter). The research question of the present project is thus How is reception of film and theater done? and there is an emphasis on naturalistic data (see Potter 540) meaning that the activity studied has not been staged by the researcher, but would have happened whether or not the study was occurring. Drawing on that definition, a study of people talking in a café after having seen a film, as they had previously planned to do, is more "natural" than a study of people using a think-aloud protocol. Lorenza Mondada explains natural orientation as a quest to observe social interaction in ordinary social contexts (53). An interview with people who have seen a film would not take place without the researcher's presence, but theater-goers would talk to each other during the intermission regardless of whether or not they are studied. The present study concerns theater and film, both of which are primarily social activities which generate more naturalistic reception discussions than generated in relation to reading, the latter of which conducted in solitude. My study aligns with the research approach outlined by Gerald C. Cupchik: in order to acquire knowledge about literature and media in everyday life, Cupchik suggests that we analyze observations of naturally occurring reception in an attempt to understand, for example, what it is like "to watch a particular kind of television program or film" (176). To paraphrase Ingrid Piller, my goal is to analyze cinema- and theater-goers' talk rather than to interview them and acquire data on cinema- and theater-goer-cum-researcher talk. An ethnographic approach can complement and support research on reading of fiction in some respects by mapping participants' practices when they use fiction and generating knowledge on their uses of fiction.

For my study presented here, field visits were used to capture the communicative activities occurred among cinema and theater goers and the field visits lasted until the participants finished their coffee after (or in the middle of) the event, which took between 15 and 90 minutes (on average 45 minutes) for cinema participants and 20 minutes for the theater participants. The field visits have implications both for the role of the researcher and for the way in which data are collected. A video camera or an audio recorder was used instead of only taking field notes, because I could more easily maintain a distance as compared to sitting down with the participants and writing down their conversation. Video recordings were chosen instead of audio recordings as video facilitates distinguishing people's voices from each other and enables the researcher to capture nonverbal social interaction. Because no long-term relationship is established, following Hubert Knoblauch according to whom the need for adequate analysis methods technical devices turn out to be a different task than handling one's field-notes" (<<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/20/43>>), the methodological premise of my study can be designated as "focused ethnography." A total of 31 conversations were recorded: 16 after seeing a film and 15 during the theater intermission. The data represent a collection about 3 different plays and 14 different films discussed by 39 cinema-goers and 44 theater-goers. The data collection took place at several cultural institutions: two local city theaters, one independent theater, two cinema complexes, and two film clubs. The film clubs were arranged by a local cultural institution. To ensure the participants' anonymity, the specific institution is not revealed.

People probably talk about film and theater on and off in all kinds of unforeseeable situations: on the bus, in the lunchroom with colleagues, at the dentist's office, in bed before falling asleep, or on the phone with a friend. Acquiring such data would be wonderful, but difficult. Many studies using natural data are set in institutional environments such as schools, therapy sessions (see Hepburn and Wiggins), or in official telephone services such as 911, children's help line (see Cromdal, Landqvist, Persson-Thunqvist, Osvaldsson; Potter and Hepburn). Because my focus is on film- and theater-goers, my research also turned out to be connected to coffeehouse research as the vast majority of the conversations took place in city or theater cafés. I could have made recordings in the same way as Eric Laurier and Chris Philo who, following research ethics guidelines of the United Kingdom, distributed posters and flyers in the cafés where they filmed. In Sweden as well, it is legal to film in public spaces as long as the filming cannot be viewed as offensive (e.g., filming in the locker room of a public swimming pool or in the dressing room of a lingerie store). So this approach would have been possible, but not recommendable. For the present study, it would hardly have been an efficient data collection method, because it would have been extremely difficult to target groups/pairs of café customer who had just been to the cinema. Robin Meisner, Dirk vom Lehn, Christian Heath, Alex Burch, Ben Gammon, and Molly Reisman handled the ethical issues of recording people at science centers and museums in similar ways: they posted notices at the entrance with information about the project, stating that visitors could choose not to participate -- although no one did. I could also have shadowed people as they left the cinemas theaters -- but just because an activity is legal does not make it ethically appropriate. Additionally, following people in order to record them seems much more intrusive than recording them with a fixed video recorder positioned at an exhibit or in a café, as Laurier and Philo did. In order to respect cinema- and theater-goers' integrity, I chose not to record them clandestinely.

My experience from previous data collection in schools is that the difficult part is finding a suitable institutional setting and a gatekeeper who can be convinced of the necessity of the study and of providing access to target participants. The gatekeeper could, for example, be the driving force behind

promoting literature at a school or the municipal organizer of film activities. Once these key persons are identified and invited to participate, it is straightforward for teachers, students, and their guardians to give their consent to participate. Gaining access to participants in an open, public space is, however, somewhat different. During the present project, it turned out to be easier to seek and obtain permission and acceptance for the project from the local cinemas and theaters and they were obliging right from the start. After talking to the head of the largest cinema chain in Sweden with 69 percent of the market of cinema visits, I was free to approach cinema-goers and advertise at cinemas all over Sweden. I also was given permission to look for participants at the three theaters I contacted. However, gatekeepers were distant from the potential participants: none of them could serve as my "Doc" (i.e., introducer to the field [see Whyte]). The only gatekeeper who was close to potential participants was the organizer of the film clubs. This individual gave the participants the initial information, asked them about participating, and provided me with e-mail addresses. I e-mailed the individuals from the film club who had offered to participate and presented the project, myself, principles of research ethics, and informed them that participation was voluntary and not connected to membership in their film club. I recognized the usefulness of gatekeepers as introducers and mediators between the researcher and potential participants. I also gave up on the idea of only including mainstream cinema-goers and approached independent cinemas as well. For example, I attended private screenings of films at universities and other organizations, the heads of which became supportive gate-keepers. Nonetheless, I avoided highbrow environments such as film festivals as my aim was to study mainstream cinema- and theater goers' everyday use of fiction. In order to reach more participants and to give them time to think about whether they would like to participate, I advertised in a free local daily paper. As compensation I offered participants a cinema gift certificate that encouraged people to e-mail me to participate.

One initial idea was to collect cinema data on only one selected film given that the theater data would only concern one play. I chose the film *One Day* as a match for the theater data collection, which was intended to take place in connection with a performance of *Romeo and Juliette*. At the beginning, my intention was to approach people who bought their tickets at the cinema before the film was to start. The first times I went to the local cinema, I spent nearly 90 minutes almost alone in the foyer, but 5-10 minutes before the film was scheduled to begin, people started arriving, lining up in front of the ticket machines. Most people purchased their tickets online and were picking them up only minutes before the film started. This left me with little time to explain the project and ask people to participate. I actually did get some participants this way, but it was time-consuming in relation to the amount of data I received permission to record. This was because I spoke to more people than who actually participated. Just like conducting street interviews (see Hermes), I approached people, presented myself and the research project, and asked if they were going to or had seen a film, were in the company of at least one more person, and if so if they were going to do something after the film that allowed conversation to take place. If these questions were answered affirmatively, I told them about the project and research ethics principles, asked for their informed consent to participate in the study and handed out information sheets about the project. This meant that I often spent time talking to people who were not going to do anything after the event that would be useful for the project. Thus, my first finding was that although watching a film together provides opportunities to talk about the common experience, compared to books people read individually and finish at different paces, such talking was not done to the extent I imagined. However, when one tries to collect data which turn out to be difficult to gather, even the smallest step toward a data corpus is important and gives some insight into the phenomenon under study. Eventually, I collected as much data as I set out to collect. My interpretation of this first finding is that for many people watching the film is their focus. Among the people who bought or collected their cinema tickets some time ahead of the showing, many went out for coffee between picking up the ticket and watching the film. In a future study, it would be interesting to enroll cinema-goers in advance and obtain their permission to follow and record them from the time they pick up their tickets thus capturing their expectations, comments during the film, and their first evaluations of the film upon leaving the auditorium and walking out of the cinema.

Some people I approached already had plans to meet others for a meal or a drink at someone's home after the movie but, for safety reasons, I chose to decline offers to accompany strangers to their homes. Because my relationship with potential participants was on par with that established during street interviews, I had no knowledge of them and they had little of myself. If they had smartphones they could look up my contact information, but because the movie's viewing took place during evening or at night, they could not double check with the university whether the information was correct. And I had even fewer possibilities to check up on them. For reasons of safety, I considered bringing an assistant with me, but came to the conclusion that it would do more harm than good: potential participants might feel more reluctant to invite two strangers to their home and in public sites having two non-participating people present might constrain participants' behavior. The cinemas at which I began collecting data all had several auditoriums. At the cinemas, I had my jacket and backpack on, carrying information sheets about the project. I noted that many people in the cinemas did not want to stop and listen to me at all. I was sometimes whisked away in the same way a peddler might be. As I show below, there were great differences in how the public space was being "done" by the audience members in the cinema foyer and in the theater foyer.

At the theaters, I was positioned more as part of a group: in comparison to long-term ethnography, my ethnographic identity did not change over time as for example Patrick D. Murphy describes it and my ethnographic identity changed as I shifted location from cinemas to theaters. At the theaters, the café staff let me leave my jacket and backpack behind the counter. The tradition is to pre-order beverages and food for the intermission before the play starts. By standing at the end of the counter, I

could hear whether people had made reservations for more than one person. This allowed me to target theater-goers who were planning to drink and eat in the company of at least one other person during the intermission and to ask whether they would like to participate in the study. Some people told me they had overheard me asking others if they would consider participating and said they hoped I would ask them as well. Hence, data collection for the theater part of the project did not take a great deal of time. I was occasionally handed dirty plates or asked to wipe tables by theater-goers who were not participating in the study, and who had mistaken me for café staff. At the cinemas, I was never mistaken for a staff member. At the theater cafés, the demand for tables is great, so I never sat down. Still I felt the need to stay in the café to be available to answer any questions the participants might have and to oversee the recordings. At the theaters, I also recorded several conversations at the same time during intermission. It seems logical that theater-goers might have perceived me as someone working at the café as I was not stressed by the short break between acts. Furthermore, not wanting to disturb the café staff or the people being recorded, I stood alone next to the counter. This supports the tentative interpretation that the theater is perceived as a unit, where every participant is part of the same event.

The film club participants were located by the cultural institution through ads in the local daily newspaper. Among those interested in participating, the organizers selected 6-7 people to ensure that as many age groups as possible were represented and that the number women and men was more or less equal. It was also through newspapers that I learned about the film clubs. Of course, only people who were willing to see the films suggested were accepted as participants. The level of interest and cinematographic knowledge varied among the participants. The participants received a DVD and cinema gift certificates allowing them to watch the 3-4 films that were going to be discussed during the film club. During the recordings of the film club, my role as a researcher was more traditional and conversations did not take place in a public space, but in a closed space at the cultural institution in question. After discussions with technicians, teachers in media production, and a documentary filmmaker, I learned that an omni-directional microphone and a camera with a wide-angle lens would be the best choice for high-quality recording. If I used individual microphones on the participants, it would be even better. However, individual microphones require a receiver for each microphone and a mixer to combine onto one audio track the signals from the separate microphones. I also had limited time in which to record, especially during the theater intermissions and I wanted to capture the conversations in as natural a manner as possible. In closed settings such as schools, it is not so unusual to set up full recording equipment with a high tripod, etc., but in a café or a bar guests and staff looked curiously around and seemed to wonder what was going on. Thus, for practical reasons I ended up using a laptop with a small webcam and hence discretion was given priority over high-quality recordings. Consequently, the participants' conversations were relatively natural, that is, less staged, and similar to what they would have been like had they occurred without my presence and the camera. However, I did have to settle for "good-enough" recordings because I lost good sound and image quality when participants moved outside the camera angle or turned their heads away from the microphone. On the other hand, these kinds of natural conversations would be impossible to recreate in a recording studio where the goal is to obtain the best possible sound and lighting (see Mondada). Nowadays, a café customer with a laptop is a common sight. I installed myself at the table next to the people I was going to record. I aimed the webcam at the participants and placed a slim table microphone and a pocket-size digital-recording device on the table. I informed them that I would not participate in their conversation and that they should tell me when they wanted to stop the recording. During the conversation, I focused on the laptop or on some paper work I brought along to have something to do that would not disturb the conversation. During the theater recordings, my time was limited to the length of the intermission. I did not have time to set up a camera, so I contented myself with audio recordings. I noted who the participants in each conversation were and made rough sketches of how they were seated, but it was difficult to locate the direction of the sound source. The findings of the study are based on the recordings not on the conversations.

In conclusion, the results of my study suggest that media response research needs to expand to include studies of naturally occurring spontaneous responses in, for example, blogs, chat forums and other arenas where people discuss books and films outside educational settings. It would be useful to devise practical methods for recording conversations which occur around the bookshelves in a library or a book store while still maintaining standard research ethics requiring informed consent. Gaining access to the naturally occurring responses of participants who have just watched a film is difficult, but far from impossible. The locations in which responses occur place specific demands on recording devices and techniques, which must be adapted to the environment and to suit the analytic process.

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