

# “There is always someone who survives from the end-of-the-world”. Qualitative attitude approach in film reception study among Finnish teenagers

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## Abstract

In recent film audience studies, quantitative and qualitative methods have been triangulated for greater understanding of the transnational film reception among fan audiences. However, focusing on specialized audiences, the surveys and in-depth-interviews may fail to recognize the nuances of the meaning-making processes among ordinary film audience. In this article I examine, with one excerpt of larger interview data, how a Finnish teenager informant elaborates his understanding on the reception of American apocalyptic action film, *2012*. The method of qualitative attitude approach is applied for film reception in order to understand how individuals carry out acts of interpretation and frame historical, cultural and social beliefs and attitudes represented in the film. The preliminary findings of an interview analyzed in this article show, that the in process of reception is film is used as communicative tool in organizing the experience.

## Introduction

Central cultural narratives and images with religious origin circulate, transform and repeat in the popular culture products as well as in the news media (Moberg, Sjö, and Granholm 2–5; Lynch, Mitchell, and Strahan 3; Lynch 244–247 Sumiala 46). The academic interest to map understanding of the complex interaction of audiences, media and popular culture and religion today is one approach to understand the relations of the social and cultural change in the West.

The interrelation of religion, media and popular culture in contemporary religious landscape is a field of study with interdisciplinary approaches. Kim Knott looked to the “very fabric of the secular” to locate religion in contemporary, western society (153.) Melanie Wright argued, that “religion is embedded and enacted in material culture and artefacts” and the complex interrelation of film and religion may be understood from the discursive study approach (26.) The role of religion in late modern societies in the West may be looked through the theoretical framework of sacred as communicative structure of meaningful and ideal, a “moral collective”, according to Gordon Lynch (133.) Christopher Partridge (119) discusses the role of the religion in popular culture is a process of re-enchantment, a return of the magical in different forms that are represented in popular culture, whereas Stig Hjarvard point to media logic, that explain the process of mediatisation of religion (24). In the critical academic research the everyday life, popular culture is a common shared context along with other significant contexts, where the meaning making practices of different audiences can be studied (Clark 15)

Back, Benneg, Edles, Gison, Inglis, Jacobs and Woodward also noted (147) the religious and supernatural themes stand out in the most popular contemporary teenager books, games, television series and films, and Apocalyptic themes provide a “compelling way to address technologic, environmental and nuclear fears and concerns”. In this article I examine, with one excerpt of larger interview data, how a Finnish teenager elaborate his reception on American apocalyptic action film, “*2012*”. First, I discuss of the methods used in three audience and reception research projects. Second, I introduce the method of qualitative attitude approach that is applied for film reception of the film “*2012*”. Third, the preliminary analysis of interview material with a teenager interviewee introduces the method of qualitative attitude approach in film reception and how the framings of the reception converts in the interview of ateenager informant, Tim.

## The Teenagers and the Peers as Film Audience

Combining different methodological approaches in reception studies originates to the Liebes and Katz (532–535.) seminal study for *Dallas* television series among adult audiences. The discussion of the reception was stimulated with different methodological approaches and observed in the living room settings in five separate ethnic communities. Liebes and Katz used the narrative, attributions and motivations of the characters in the research design, where they combined ethnographic methods, focus-group interview and questionnaires. The main interest was to study, what it was that the informants understood in reception of *Dallas* and how their interviewees talked about the reception. Barker and Mathjison (666–667.) asked from transnational film audience survey of *Lord of the Rings* that what it was that mattered to different audiences. The results of the surveys showed that the motivation for cinematic modalities such as “Epic” and “Good vs. Evil” proved to be most enjoyable among the teenager audience.

The reception among Danish teenagers in the framework of mediatisation theory of religion is one of the recent studies in the field of religion and media and film. Lynn NybroPetersen (231–232.) argued that in secular Denmark, media is the central institution that meets Danish teenager’s interest to spirituality. Among teenagers, this happens through consumption of the supernatural genre film and television series. The case study showed that Danish teenager fans reconstruct their religious imagination in interaction with American produced films and television series with transformed content of supernatural and religion. The construction of religious imaginations was studied with triangulated quantitative and qualitative approaches of surveys, focus group and in-depth-interviews in order to cumulate data to the point where new data no longer emerges (Nybro Petersen 235; see also Saumure&Given 196-197). Petersen designed the study on the preliminary understanding, that transformed religious imagination is constructed in the reception of teenager fan audience and thus, validated the theory of mediatisation of religion.

The role of the audience in Petersen study is looked in the context of fandom in Denmark. The study that covered only the audience with the ”interest in fiction with religious themes” (Nybro Petersen 234–235.) A shared interest to the television series between researcher and the interviewee, according to Petersen, created an atmosphere where the young interviewees felt comfortable and relaxed to talk.

The methodological choices, the variation or the regulation of the interviewees in the research design are the factors that direct the production of gathered data in the reception studies. Adopted from the commercial pre-testing of the films, the methods of attitude surveys and focus group methods are common also in academic research (Barker and Mathjison 674) . The basic critical notion for research interviews is that the data material is produced in the process aiming the inquiry and building valid and reliable data with the choices of the informants and the reseacher (see also Aaltonen and Honkatukia 44). In the course of the actual interviews the material may lead to critical adjustments of research questions (Utriainen 184–185; Clark 242). The qualitative interviews provides the most interesting material of the lived experience, especially when the analysis of interview links to the academic discourses on the subject matter. It is likely that this is the case in the material where the interviewee had motivation, like the fan informants in the Petersen’s study. However, the reception study of the more ordinary audience is central for understanding the contextual processes of film reception at large.

From youth studies point of view, the data gathering among teenagers is always biased due to the culturally constructed imbalance of adult and child is stressed in the research interviews (Alasuutari 152–153; Aaltonen and Honkatukia 36). In triangulation of the methods this may happen in all three stages of inquiry. First, the interpretation of the survey answers may be unexpected and difficult to analyse. In the material of the film *Lord of the Rings*, an unexpected segment of audience appeared. They identified themselves as unemployed while their actual age implied to the secondary school pupils (Barker and Mathjison X). In the class room surveys, the answers in the questionnaire may be exaggerated (Barker and Mathjison , 647). Second, the non-verbal communication and embodied presence of an adult as moderator of the focus group or researcher effect to the interaction, and therefore to the whole data as well (Barker and Mathjison 674; Utriainen 183).

In the interaction that is constructed by an adult or institution, a young person or child response with the role or with a behaviour they can relate to, that is the role of pupil or team player (Goffman 290, Alasuutari 153). It is likely, that this happens also during the research interviews among young interviewees. The young interviewee may, according to natural behaviour, please the adult with the answers or responding with a behaviour that is expected in the class rooms or in the groups or teams for hobbies. The power dynamic between adult and child or other children has implications on the reliability of the collected interview material. In the film reception

interview, the power lines between the researcher and teenager interviewee is a source critical as well as ethical question.

## How to get the teenagers talk about the film?

We engage with films for aesthetic pleasure and as part of our contemporary social life, adopt ideas or styles and put films in the use of education, political or ideological purposes. We discuss the representations, symbolism, realism or fantasy in the film. The aesthetic experience of film and the reflective meaning making processes constitute the film reception in shared, social interaction. If popular film representations are shaping our social life, rituals, imaginaries, values, attitudes and meanings, are these transformations to be found in the reception? And how the ordinary teenager audiences do talk about film?

The two pilot interviews for my dissertation project had a great importance in the research design. Two different results came up when I used open structured in the interview. First, the presence of a dominant adult, a researcher, parent or teacher may narrow the speech out of fear to fail. The speech is also influenced by the contexts of time and space, that is, the social or institutional settings, where the interviews are taking place (Aaltonen&Honkatukia; Utriainen.) The power relation built in between the adult and child in social interaction was introduced to me in the first trial interview that took place at the home of the 13-year-old interviewee. After the screening, the interviewee did not choose to talk about the film because he did not like it. In my interview material, similar narrowing of the speech happened, too among 15-year-old interviewees.

The second trial interviewee was a film fan and 18-year-of-age. She had brilliant notions about the ideological and gendered values represented in the film. The religious narrative was secondary to the role of women in the film, a cultural representation that evoked her attitudes of equality. The aesthetic and cinematic features of the film were the topics she appreciated most. The long reception discussion proved to be complex because her knowledge repertoire in film making, actors and screen writing. The reception of the film lover underlined the strong binary value construction as a driver of the action film. Her arguments about films and the meaning they have in everyday politics made me understand that, as researcher, I was handed a gift of reflective talk of reception.

Both of these interviews were success because the three main observations I made, first, the attitudes represented in the film are as important in the reception talk as the aesthetic and cinematic features, second, the critical factor of the cultural imbalance between researcher and teenager and third, the design of the interview meet the two above mentioned points. Next I introduce the film analysis for the interviews and the method of qualitative attitude research approach.

## The dramaturgical analysis of an action film

The dramaturgical features in action film genre follow the structure of classical theory of Aristotelian drama. We, as audience and individuals, identify to the protagonist character that struggles against the antagonist character. In the identification process we experience emotions and take stands for and against the characters we identify. The narrative is driven of basic binary of right and wrong and they are represented in the characters and their motivations. The variations of the binaries create suspense and establish motivations to the actions of the characters. The identification takes place in as individual process and holds the attention during the film. The classical drama structure is repeated in the narratives of the news, fairy tales and in different constructions of religious literature, plays and film, to mention some (Kantola; Aaltonen). The variation of the theme creates a dynamic discourse in the dramaturgy that can be deconstructed in the analysis as positions or attitudes.

In the dramaturgical film analysis, the narrative, the plot and the characters are deconstructed along with the analysis in the film scenes. The variations of the themes, that saturated in the analysis of the film “2012”, I call dramaturgical attitudes (Samura&Given 198). The dramaturgical attitudes form the seven arguments in the structure of the reception interview. The arguments were concerning the film representations of 1. sudden change, 2. democracy, 3. freedom of speech, 4. religion, 5. equality, 6. science and 7.sacrifice.

The interviewees attended the screening of the same Hollywood film, “2012” directed and written by Roland Emmerich. In very short synopsis, the film is a classical action film with a storyline of the becoming disaster, end-of-the-world that threatens the hero, a writer. He is not in established or in powerful position, but works for his life and holds two jobs in Hollywood. He is a father of two, misunderstood as an author, divorced and sees children on holidays. With his luck and wit, he understand the signs, saves the children, then his family and last, the

humanity. The culturally recognisable and circulated narrative in the film is the story of great flood, the building of the arks, the survival of the cultural hero and his family and new land to live on. From film aesthetic point of view, the film “2012” was the one first film that featured the advanced animation technology in the destruction scenes of the recognizable environment and film characters that looked realistic (*Animation World Network*, 17 Nov. 2009).

## The Method and the Ethical Questions

The ethnographic method of qualitative attitude approach is applied for film reception in order to understand how individuals in film audience carry out acts of interpretation through frames of historical, cultural and social beliefs and attitudes. Attitudes are understood rhetorical by their nature and they are varying for different motivations, reasons and situations (Vesala and Rantanen 17; 23–27; Pesonen and Vesala xx.) The reflexivity and the social basis of attitudes serve purpose in the everyday negotiations and argumentation (Vesala and Rantanen 31–33). In the commercial film reception research, the concept of attitude is understood as permanent condition of an individual. This understanding has consequences in the data because the behavioural approach to attitude research is widely used for marketing and communication research organizations (Vesala and Rantanen 35 ; Liebes and Katz 352; Barker and Mathjison 674.)

In the method applied in reception interview, two material stimulus for attitude formation were used. The first was the screening of the film, and the second was the semi-structured arguments for the interview in written form. The materiality of the method is rooted to the life world of a young person. In the qualitative attitude research approach interview, the arguments are in a visual form and they are showed one at the time through the interview (Pesonen and Vesala xx).

In Finland, the 15-year-old is allowed participate to the research interview as own decision after the permission of the institute if the interview takes place in the institutional surroundings. Due to the fact of personal consent to be interviewed, the age of the interviewees in my material varied from 14-to-19 years of age. After the written consent procedure with each interviewee, I explained the aim and the meaning of the interview to the dissertation research project and emphasized the voluntary aspect of being interviewed. I encouraged the interviewees to move and talk during the screening and the interview, and use breaks freely or leave. I repeated in the beginning of the screening and the interview. The ground ethical guidelines that are discussed in own words teenager interviewees built trust between the adult and the child and thus empowered the agency of teenager interviewee in the research (Aaltonen and Honkatukia 41–42). Furthermore, the written consent is usually in abstract language for professionals, and hence, remains unclear for young people that usually are attending an interview for the first time.

### “If there is an End-of-the-World , it is there to make people fear and behave”

The interviews in my reception research began with a written argument of change, which is a common dramaturgic feature in the beginning of a film. Liebes and Katz (532.) analysed the patterns how their informants involved or distanced themselves in their speech that concerned the television series *Dallas* by categorizing them in four different aspects. The first category, framing, that denotes to the context that the viewer assigns to the reception.

My interviewee Tim was 19 years old at the time of the interview and he was an assisting elder peer in a Confirmation Camp where I visited for recruiting youth to participate in research interviews. The actual screening took place in the Youth Café after his return back home from the Confirmation Camp. The interviewees chose to come and thus had the motivation to participate to the research. Tim arrived to the screening for interest on the subject matter of the end-of-the-world and he saw the film “2012” for the first time. Digitally recorded interview was transcribed and edited to the level of conversation and after that translated from Finnish to English by the researcher. For the preliminary analysis purposes, the material is edited from the actual interaction and the non-verbal level is not transcribed.

The beginning of the actual reception interview was marked after the informal conversation and the researcher introduces the written arguments and shows them. Tim reads aloud the first interview argument about the change represented in the film “*Things that seem to be stable may suddenly change*”.

“Things that seem to be stable may suddenly change”. That is true when there is an accident or a member of your family dies. Family is always that is stable but death can change it easily or if I myself get in the accident. I really don't believe that end-of-the-world kind of thing could happen. But something like that, like an earth quake. Not

in Finland but abroad, if we think where it is possible like after an earth quake when cities and homes are lost. If we think about the film, the relations in the family changed when the stepfather died and the father returned to family. (TP19)

The written argument invites Tim to take a clear stand. First, he reflects change with an argument of his own life world. He develops different stages of the dramatic changes in his speech, that each has the referential framing of real life world. The last sentence Tim addresses with framing of the aesthetic construction of the family represented in the film.

Liebes and Katz used the analytic tool of *framing* in the analysis of the reception interview material. Analytical framing has two contexts, whereas the referential context concerns the actual life world of the interviewee and the in the critical context deals the aesthetical constructions in reception (532.)

The argumentation in interviews varied in length and framings, and in the beginning Tim addresses are short and the context of his framing is referential, dealing with real life (532). When the interview proceeded, Tim's argumentation developed and the reflection around of the topic were wider and he used multiple critical, aesthetic framings.

In the second argument, "In democracy, everyone have influence on their lives" Tim begins his reflection and refers to embodied experience in his life. The referential and critical framings in his speech appears to merge, when he addresses the action film genre, a general level of films that he has watched before and compares them to the film. The attribution of "cold blooded" introduces a third framing, that has a content of theory in normative ethics or moral principle. The third framing is important in Tim's reception and the concept of "in cold blood" constitutes his argument through the interview.

*"In democracy everyone have influence on their lives"* In democracy of course you can influence in things, that is the point. But not really, because in the elections one vote does not make much difference if there are millions of votes. In that sense, I think that I have not so much influence to my life. If we think democracy in the small scale, the answer is yes. Like, in the school I am member of the student board, and we are ten and my vote is one of them, so it has influence. The practice is that we make all decisions and we do not as much from other students. But then, after decisions you can always make an appeal or make initiatives and make changes in that way. [...] But it is like in the film, democracy did not work in that situation. In the end-of-the-world one has to act in cold blood. But in the scene of the film, where they talked about taking the workers in the boat, in that scene they voted for opening the gates again, and there was the leaders of the states that voted. In action film scenes, it is possible that they negotiate, if they leave or wait, so that is also some kind of democracy, too. (TP19)

The argument "If there is only little to share, some may be left without" is expressed controversial form and it is very easy to take opposite attitude towards the argument. However, Tim begins his address in critical framings of the film narrative and agrees with the argument. The third framing appears again in speech when he takes his stand with reason and explains the "cold logic".

Yes, I think that some have to be left without, like in that film. If everybody can get on board, as many as it [the ark] takes, there will be problems, like if there is not enough food for everyone if they are rescued too. .. If there is food let's say for a hundred and you share it for a thousand, so everybody dies because of sharing it for everybody. Of course this is cold and logical but it is better to save a hundred than a thousand. And in the film of course, there was room in the arks but was there also food, medicine and air? Room is not everything. The chance in the film was important but the future of the mankind and its needs should be taken in account, too. Capable people are needed, the ones that can work with their hands and build. And I don't know if the rich were useful in that way. Maybe old people should not be on board.. they cannot work but they do have a lot of knowledge. (TP19)

In our culture, sharing is emphasized as good behavior. It is also a central moral theme in the ideologies and religions, normative ethics and altruism. In Tim's reception speech, a special feature of the method occurred and lead to the reflection where Tim played with the critical, aesthetical framing of reception and brought second time the third framing, the "cold logic" to the speech and staged it in the scene of the film catastrophe. Next Tim followed the normative framing and varied the possible choices, where these framings lead his speech. This act of reflection took place in critical, film aesthetic framing.

When the last argument of the interview is discussed, the informal discussion continues. The time spent in the screening and the interview together in this point of interview was over three hours. The motivation to participate was enabled with the materiality of the text and the aesthetic challenge of framing and organising the film experience. During the informal discussion, Tim took the card for the fifth argument from the pile, "If there is only little to share, some may be left without" and continued to elaborate his third framing, reflective "cold logic" or



the action “in cold blood”. Tim uses the third framing of moral action in the critical, aesthetical framing of the reception when the referential framing is embodied and material.

*[The researcher informs the interviewee, that all arguments are discussed. The informal discussion continues. After a while, the interviewee picks up one from the pile of the seven written arguments and points the number 5]*

I would like to comment this one again. That thinking in cold blood, from children point of view, for example, if we had one bag of sweet and they get less sweets they expect, it is possible that they are not content with sharing the bag of sweets with others. It is the same with soda, if you only get little bit but not a decent gulp, you are not happy because you wanted more than you got.

So we can think also that if there is little to share and you don't know about that. It means [in the film] that maybe they as persons were more satisfied because they did not have the knowledge [about catastrophe] and that is why they did not envy those ones who got a place in the ark. Because the world did not even know that whole humanity perished. They only understood the destruction of their own town but not the destruction of the world. It is the same in the film, the world did not know about the arks.

I think that I have to add, that one has to act in cold blood there. When they talked [in the film] if they can let the other people die out there [on the docks]. It was quite stupid, because he [the scientist] meant that he was talking only about the people he could see in front of him. He did not think at all, that all people around the world were to die. It was not logical thinking in the film at all. [...] *[Discussion continues for ten more minutes]* (TP19)

## Conclusions

The methodological tool has two efficient implications in the case of Tim's interview. The materiality of the arguments appear to be a key for relaxed ambient where the talk started easily and in one case, discussed in this paper, continued also after the actual interview. The materiality of film together with the interview arguments seemed to belong to the socially shared interaction, not to the researcher alone. The materiality also appeared to increase in some cases the empowerment of the young interviewee and thus, momentarily changed the cultural unbalance of an adult and young person in the interview situation.

The screening of the film and the visual arguments of the themes of the film are as important as the relaxed atmosphere during the interview. Here it was communicated by explicating the informant that there is all the time for reflection. The proved written arguments are reliable for two reasons. First, it helped the interpretation of the meaning when it was read aloud and left on the table during the interview. Second, reading aloud provided time to think about the argument's meaning and it lowered the barrier to talk because the interviewee can form the opinion to agree or disagree and then give one's reasons.

The informant Tim reflected on the fifth argument of equality and developed his stand and the argumentation also after the interview. In this short example, he put the film in work and used it as communicative tool for intellectual and philosophical reflection and organizing the experience of film reception. Tim's framings and attitudes in the reception, the motivations and the cultural belonging to the mainstream religious institution in Finland opens up the field to understand the multiple ways film, religious narrative and popular culture are used among teenager audiences.

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