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On the material and the symbolic: Silverstone's double articulation of research traditions in new media studies

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Imagine the typical suburban living room, a post-war creation co-evolving with the rise of consumer society as a communal family space, replacing the Goffmanian division of public and private spaces – formal parlour for guests, all-purpose 'back room' for family - that preceded it.[1] This living room contains, and displays to its occupants and visitors, many objects of both symbolic value and material worth: the three piece suite of sofa and armchairs, the nest of coffee tables, an assortment of lamps, decorative objects and photographs. And, significantly, a fast-changing set of consumer goods that are distinct from the foregoing: the television set, now wide screen, increasingly digital, the DVD player with its accompanying shelf of popular titles, the HiFi with CD player and radio, the computer with internet access squeezed into a corner, and last, left lying on various items of furniture, someone's mobile phone, Ipod or Blackberry.

Roger Silverstone wrote about television, about the household consumption of technologies, even about suburbia. When I look back over his books, this image of the living room resonates throughout his writings, a room many of us have spent our lives in, raised our families in, yet a room culturally and historically positioned between two key moments – first, the preceding period: a time when public and private spaces were carefully separated, especially in lower middle class British homes, and when media goods were both less dominant and more carefully arranged (pride of place given to the 'wireless', class distinction claimed through the gilt-tooled encyclopaedia and row of novels in the 'front room', though also evident from the newspaper and magazine titles lying casually in the back room)[2]; second – the present period, in which the living room is increasingly deserted for the bedroom and in which private experience is prioritised even in public spaces, through the sound bubble created by headphones, the personal ownership of a television set, and the individualised mediascape of the mobile phone and Ipod.[3]

This room captures many elements of Silverstone's lifelong interest in media and consumption, for it foregrounds the shifting boundaries between public and private spheres, it is redolent of its historical time and cultural context yet it bears continuities with other times and other places, it is shot through with the expression of class distinction, and it invites the cultural critic to challenge the assumption that the

mundane is trivial – for Silverstone, it is precisely through the mundane that the subtle and too-easily unnoticed workings of power are achieved. In short, it demands that economic and societal processes are to be understood significantly through the messiness of domestic practices in everyday life; if these are tidied away, the relation between macro and micro accounts of power becomes incomprehensible (and as Silverstone said, in the end, it's all about power[4]).

But one of Silverstone's central concerns was that we should not, in focusing on these processes of daily consumption, miss the vital point that some of those objects arrayed in the living room – or, today, in bedrooms or even coat pockets – are distinctively different. As in *Dr Who*'s 'Time Lord science', some of those objects are bigger on the inside than they are on the outside.[5] The television, the HiFi, the mobile phone, even the books are *both* part of the world of sofas and lamps, objects of consumption, designed for the domestic market, located in the time-space relations of the present, carrying their markers of gender and class, *and* they are also fundamentally different. Like the Tardis, they appear ordinary, yet they are far from inert (Silverstone, 2006a); rather they are portals to other worlds that open up the realms of the imaginary, connecting the domestic living room – staggeringly - to the rest of the globe.

For some, this disconnects media – precisely because of their symbolic power – from the ordinary material objects of consumption research: Campbell (1995: 111) argues that if the sociology of consumption were to accept the premise of Silverstone and Hirsch's (1992) volume, *Consuming Technologies*, namely that media and consumption are intimately connected, then it would 'lose whatever meaningful or distinctive character it is in the process of developing'. Problematically for Silverstone, much of media studies takes a similar view: Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) book, *Audiences*, excellent though it is, is typical insofar as it discusses all aspects of people's engagement with television programmes and genres except for those concerned with the space-time contexts in which this engagement occurs, notwithstanding the growing body of research on television – along with the VCR, telephone, computer etc – as a consumer product, subject to the same market logic of competition, innovation, diffusion and appropriation as armchairs, coffee tables and lamps (Couldry, et al, in press).

For Silverstone, neither approach alone is satisfactory: media can and should be analysed as objects of consumption, but such an analysis does not exhaust their significance, for they have a unique status among other objects, mediating between the private world of the household and the public sphere, traditionally national but increasingly global. Through the concept of double articulation, Silverstone (1994) contrasts the analysis of the media *qua* material objects located in particular spatio-temporal settings with the analysis of the media *qua* texts or symbolic messages located within the flows of particular socio-cultural discourses, precisely in order to demand that we integrate the two. By implication, the public is also doubly articulated as consumer-viewer or, for new media, consumer-user[6]. Moreover, research should also be doubly articulated, connecting theories of consumption, economics and domestication with theories of representation, interpretation and influence.

Yet doubly-articulated research has proved surprisingly difficult (Livingstone, 2003). Indeed, it was a struggle – intellectual, disciplinary and methodologically - even in the 'Household and Information and Communication Technologies' project that Roger

Silverstone led at Brunel University in the late 1980s, with David Morley, Andrea Dahlberg, Eric Hirsch and myself (Silverstone, et al, 1989; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992). Out of our lively, often exciting but also demanding and fraught research meetings, we developed a series of tactics that centred on those mediations of daily life in which the material and the symbolic articulated together. Talking through *The Radio Times*,[7] for instance, revealed how family members' timetable intersected with the structured array of programme genres available, so as to enable 'family time', 'me-time' (often, soap opera for women, sport for men), even time for the nation (c.f. the domestic rituals of participating in national media events). Today's equivalent might be to record people's 'favourites', their routines in going online (first email, then the online newspaper, then…), each move in the sequence fixing a small part of a vast symbolic potential in the here-and-now of time-space relations (see, for example, Bakardjieva, 2005).

Yet conjoining these research tactics into a thoroughgoing analysis was demanding, and the absence of a book presenting the final findings of the Brunel project is symptomatic of the challenge. In Press and Livingstone (2006), we observe similar difficulties within internet studies, arguing that the first generation of research prioritised the online world, illustrated by Sherry Turkle's (1995) inquiry into the playful construction of identity online in *Life on the Screen*, while neglecting the offline world in which the player was, necessarily, situated. Drawing less from psychology and more from the sociology of technology use, a parallel strand of research focused instead on life *in front* of the screen, being squarely centred on the space-time relations of those offline contexts in which the new object – computer, internet – was located, yet neglecting the internet as a medium (or media) beyond mapping the use of broad content categories (typically, as for television, education, entertainment, information, communication).

More recently, we begin to see more successful integrations of online and offline (e.g. Miller and Slater, 2000), yet even in these, the account of the online is prosaic, lacking the richness of semiotic or discursive accounts as developed earlier in the analysis of film, television or, indeed, print. To take one recent example, Maria Bakardjieva offers a perceptive account of the genres of use, but says less about the genres of online content being thus used, something still unresolved in the field (see, for example, Burbules, 1998; Jensen, 2005; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). Maren Hartmann (2006) makes a similar critique of Silverstone's follow-up of the Brunel study with Leslie Haddon. Thus the challenge remains to sustain a subtle analysis of both the domestic context of use and the semiotic richness of the online world that people engage in; in the turn away from text towards context, a turn that Silverstone himself partly led, it is the former that gets lost.[8] Yet without such an articulation, processes of mediation – between public and private, local and global, personal and societal – become problematically invisible; indeed, it is through these processes of mediation that power and responsibility, the central themes of his last two books, have their effect (Silverstone, 1999, 2005, 2006b).

A recurring theme in *Dr Who* is the evil power that invades the living room, capturing the minds of the viewers. Accounting for the power of audiences or users remains one of the most contested aspects of media (and consumption) studies. As Andrea Press and I argued recently (2006), much depends here on the position of critique. When critical researchers have been concerned to critique the dominant power of the media

for conveying a world view that reinforces the interests of the already-powerful, then researchers side with the Doctor in seeking out the tactical point of resistance, showing how the domestic practices of everyday life allow us to escape the strategies of media power elites (as in the shift from media imperialism to globalisation theory). But when, as in the early days of mass internet adoption, media are seen to open up new opportunities for creative or anarchic activities, that same living room is construed by domestication research as a conservative force, reproducing online the familiar distinctions of gender, generation and class that structure inclusion and exclusion offline (as in the debate over the digital divide).

During his career, Silverstone became gradually less optimistic of the tactical user, more critical of their conservative collusion with dominant norms, saying recently that, 'insofar as …our media's representation of the other, remains unchallenged… then those who receive and accept them are neither mere prisoners of a dominant ideology nor innocents in a world of false consciousness; rather they are willing participants, that is, complicit, or even actively engaged, that is, collusive, in a mediated culture that fails to deliver its promises of communication and connection' (2002: 762). Yet perhaps in his empathy with the other, Silverstone sidelines his own message about context, for as ethnographic studies have amply demonstrated, people are constrained by their circumstances - that structured array of opportunities and constraints that is, in many ways, beyond their control.

More prosaically perhaps, but useful for those seeking to conduct doubly-articulated research, Hartmann suggests that the problem is also partly methodological – the messages of television are more susceptible to discrete analysis than are those of online or mobile media (see also Livingstone, 2004).[9] Yet one might also argue the opposite: while television reception escapes the researcher's gaze by occurring largely 'in the heads' of its audience (notwithstanding valiant attempts of some, e.g. Liebes and Katz, 1990, to externalise this), new media use is at least partially visible, for people must, necessarily, interact overtly (through selecting, clicking, scrolling and typing,) thereby coinciding in an auditable manner the symbolic and the material (Livingstone, 2003), co-constructing the message itself, albeit within strictly pre-defined limits akin to Hall's 'preferred reading' (1980) or Eco's 'closed text' (1979; see also Burbules, 1998). Hence the potential of approaches such as those of Bakardjeva (2005) and Hargittai (e.g. Hargittai and Shafer, 2006) to capitalise on this (see also work on the use of 'thinking aloud protocols' as well as the potential but yet to be proven use of software methods that record online interaction).

Thus our task should surely be easier for new than old media, though it appears not to be. A further problem arises from the sequencing of the research enterprise. Unlike in the early days of audience reception studies, when a subtle reading of audiovisual texts (whether based on literary criticism, ideology critique, semiotics, or rhetorical analysis) was already well-established long before the ethnographic turn opened up a new challenge, today research on new media contents and users proceeds in tandem, with the latter moving ahead faster than the former can keep up. In other words, although initially diverted in early new media studies by hyperbolic and futuristic accounts of a disconnected cyberspace, new media studies have not conducted their fair share of detailed, effortful analyses of websites, games, online interactions, and so forth in a manner which transcends the particularistic (for of course, such analyses exist) – they have not, in short, been debated in the research community in order to

enable the emergence of a shared repertoire of analytic approaches, recognised problems, methodological tools and examples of best practice, let alone something resembling a theory (or theories) of the text.

Here I am reminded of Roger Silverstone's first book, *The Message of Television* (1981), a detailed investigation of the conventions of television – its genres, narratives and myths, its subtle encoding of normative assumptions so as to balance psychological desires for closure with the established interests of producers, while also permitting some structured opportunities for interpretative openness or flexibility. This was, of course, a book of its time, when the excitement lay in the democratic extension of literary theories to popular culture (Eagleton, 1983), when meaning was to be revealed through semiotic analysis, a movement which then extended into European semiotics, 'reception-aesthetics' in Europe and 'reader-response theory' in America (Suleiman and Crosman, 1980), emphasising the dialectic between text and reader in the production and reproduction of meaning, as in analyses of the role of the reader (Eco, 1979) or decoder (Hall, 1980). In media studies, a vast literature exists applying these approaches to popular mass culture, debating analytic differences, contesting semiotic interpretation, exploring audience responses to the implied reader inscribed in the text, and so forth. A parallel richness would now be most welcome in new media studies.

Let me end by noting, as an after word, that my use of the Tardis analogy is not accidental, though partially prompted by its recent revival by the BBC on British screens, thereby reviving also a popular exploration of the relation between technology and society. For its mythic message is one Silverstone would surely have approved of; as revealed by John Fiske's (1984: 173) careful dissection of the narrative and mythic structures of the text, Dr Who repeatedly tells a tale in which 'The Doctor typically defeats a totalitarian, scientific antagonist and replaces him or her with a liberal democratic humane scientist to take over and bring justice and freedom to the oppressed serf class'. In his last book especially, though also implicitly in previous ones, Silverstone calls on us all to act with a similar sense of responsibility in both our domestic and our academic lives.

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Author biography

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Endnotes

[1] See Goffman (1959).
[2] See, for example, Spigel (1992) and Putnam and Newton (1990).
[3] See Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda, (2005), Livingstone (2002), Morley (2000).
[4] Silverstone (1999, paraphrased from page 143).
[5] *Dr Who* is a hugely popular science fiction drama series, produced off and on by the BBC since the 1960s and sold worldwide (Fiske, 1984).
[6] Though the importance of symbolic interpretation is already lost in the inadequate term, 'user'; Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006). The interpretative is best captured, in my view, by the analogy of 'the reader' – of texts, of the world; hence the notion of literacy may prove most fruitful in the long term.
[7] A major UK weekly magazine listing the television schedules.
[8] As I wrote in Livingstone (2003), drawing on the classic figure-ground metaphor of Gestalt theory, it would seem that research focuses either on what's on the screen or on what's surrounding the screen - the further one stands back from the television set or computer to take in the context of the living room, the harder it is to see what's on the screen, yet to focus in on what's on the screen is to lose perspective on the social and material context that surrounds it. Crucially, both these screens – television and computer - enable social interaction, and isolated pleasures, precisely because of their symbolic content (*the text*), just as that symbolic content is always appropriated as meaningful in a particular and defining space-time *context*.

[9] Hartmann (2006) develops the case for a third dimension, a triple articulation, comprising media as message, media as object, and media as context; whether object and context are usefully separated or not is a matter for further debate; the point is that typically both are considered, within both ethnographic and more traditional sociological work, and she and I are in agreement that the message – of television, of the internet - must stay in focus.