The Message of Silverstone

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'Why study the media?' Roger Silverstone asked in a book of that title published in 1999. The Message of Television (Silverstone 1981) was his first shot at an answer to that question. To read and compare the two books is to become aware both of the fundamental continuities in Silverstone's thinking about the media—why they were worth studying; why they mattered—and the extent of the changes in the world and the media in the three decades that separated them. Few people nowadays return to the academic literature on television of 30 years ago. Time and television have both moved on. To re-read The Message of Television now is step back to what seems like a distant past. Television was then a very new medium of social communication; not much more than 20 years old in America and Britain, less than a decade old in most of Europe and in the rest of world mostly still non-existent. Now at the start of the 21st century the era of broadcast television is already past in America and is fading in Europe. Elsewhere in the world the mushrooming new television services of the last few years simply do not have the historically determined character of the 'television' that was taken as given in the 1970s. Today it requires an effort of historical remembering to recall the television that is the subject of The Message of Television which examined a serialized drama produced and transmitted in 1974.

Television was then, everywhere, a predominantly national television, experienced and thought about as such. Economies of scale, political regulation, channel scarcity and audience expectations combined to produce a small number of highly centralized broadcasting institutions, most of which began in the era of radio now overshadowed by its new giant offspring. There was little choice for viewers: in America, the three networks still dominated the viewing landscape, and in Britain, the BBC had two television channels which competed for the national audience with the single networked channel of its commercial rival, ITV (Independent Television). This was the brief heyday of national broadcast television as the dominant medium of everyday life. Watching television was the main daily and weekly activity for most people, typically shared with others, for households then had only one television set, usually in the living-room. The household ownership of several TV sets (one for shared viewing, the rest for use by individual members in their own separate spaces) was a decade away. Television-viewing was understood as a family activity, an assumption that underpinned Nationwide, perhaps the BBC's most characteristic program of the '70s, whose ideological construction of Britain as a nation of (white, suburban, middle-class) families was deftly de-constructed by Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley (1978).

This television had rapidly and unobtrusively become a normal experience for most people, whose horizon was equally unobtrusively and normatively defined as British, French, American and so on. The world-historical role of television, so visible to all of us today, was far less apparent then to most contemporaries, apart from the visionary Marshall McLuhan. The remarkable developments in telecommunications and computers and the roll-out of attendant digital and mobile communication technologies—all this, which is by now an embedded, taken for granted feature of our world - must be bracketed when we think of the 1970s. Television, which is now thought of as an old ('traditional')

medium of communication, was then the new medium and one which only became an object of academic consideration in the course of that decade. For Roger Silverstone who, in the early 1970s, had quit working in television as a producer in order to study it academically, it was obvious that it was a new and important element in contemporary life. But how to study it was an open question since the newness of television itself meant there were few established lines of enquiry into it.

The way into the 'message' of television that Silverstone proposed was to think of it as myth, and the way into the analysis of myth was via a structural analysis of mythic narratives. Television was thought of then as a story-teller. The writings of Harold Innis (1972, 1973) and Marshall McLuhan (1962, 1964, 1968) had between them established a prevalent way of thinking of communication as media, mediated communication. The medium is the message, McLuhan had famously declared and the message of television was its orality, the return of spoken (oral) culture long repressed by the hegemony of writing and print. Television had a 'bardic' function (Fiske and Hartley 1978). It was to contemporary society what Homer was in ancient Greece—The Singer of Tales (Lord 1960). Its story-telling role placed it at the heart of contemporary society and redeemed the lost category of experience, eclipsed in modern times by the information-bearing role of newspapers (Benjamin 1973). These were minor motifs—all the texts cited in this paragraph are listed in Silverstone's bibliography—that helped to introduce and establish the major theme of the mythic role of television.

This role was a new incarnation of something very old, as old perhaps as human societies and their cultures. Myth was central to human societies as a mediating device for the management of the implacable realities of life in all its unpredictable, uncontrollable strangeness. Myth was a heuristic device for making the unknown knowable and the strange familiar. It brought order to chaos through the formal structures of language and narrative. There is a palpable sense, in all Silverstone's thought, of the fragility of the ordinary, orderly character of the world. Beneath the light surface of things lies darkness and disorder. In his later writings, psychoanalysis became a powerful means for acknowledging, interpreting and containing the unruly power of unconscious forces:

It forces us to confront fantasy, the uncanny, desire, perversion, obsession: those so-called troubles of the everyday which are represented and repressed, both, in media texts of one kind or another, and which disturb the thin tissue of what passes for the rational and the normal in modern society (Silverstone 1999:11).

Whether television is an analyst of the psyche or mythic bard its therapeutic function is the same. It is the new social medium in which the contemporary troubles of human life are displayed and, at the same time, somehow coped with, dealt with, managed and contained. This was from the start and remained thereafter a view of television that distinguished Silverstone's work from most of his contemporaries. He drew on the same sources as others did at the time. He read the same authors and applied the same methods to the study of television. But his understanding of what television meant, his instinctive sense of what it was doing and why it mattered, went against the grain of majority opinion in the emerging academic field of Media Studies in the 1970s.

The dominant definition of television, established across the decade by Stuart Hall and his students at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the University of Birmingham, was in political terms. Television, in its institutional form, was an agent of social control. It operated on the terrain of culture as an instrument of hegemonic bourgeois social forces. Birmingham's master concept was of television as ideology. Silverstone did not (could not) buy this. In his initial engagement with the study of television he began by acknowledging 'a lack and an inadequacy':

The lack consists in the relative paucity of any mature studies in the content of television and the inadequacy in the arguments, false as I hope to show, that television can only be understood in terms of the specificity of bourgeois culture and ideology, and as such is either distorting or transient or both (Silverstone 1981: 2).

One understanding of myth is as a mechanism that falsifies and distorts the realities of our human condition. In another view it is an indispensable means whereby those realities which we could scarcely bear to confront directly (they would petrify us) are faced as in a glass, darkly. The former was the view from Birmingham that prevailed at the time and since. The latter is the rather more lonely view that Silverstone began to explore as the message of the medium of television. There was much common ground of course. It was generally agreed that television operated on the terrain of everyday life and experience as mediated through common sense. Television and the everyday were an enigma, a riddle, a social hieroglyph to be decoded through the analysis of the deep structures that under-girded them. Both were largely and in varying degrees unconscious: their operations were on the whole unwitting and unreflective and so lacking a critical self-awareness, and in a deeper sense their operations were not, ordinarily, accessible to ordinary consciousness. It required the intervention of analysis to make explicit what remained, for good or bad practical reasons, necessarily implicit in everyday television and in everyday life. The surface meaning of both needed to be decoded in order to reach their latent meaning. The tools for this work of analysis were commonly available and commonly used by researchers in the 1970s. But Silverstone 'read' the latent message of television differently and reached very different conclusions from most of his colleagues about its cultural role in contemporary society.

Four chapters on culture, language, myth and narrative prepare the ground for an analysis of the morphology and structure of the serialized television drama, Intimate Strangers. Myth is the master concept for understanding television and culture (chapter 1) and myth is to be understood in terms of language (chapter 3) and narrative (chapter 5). It is useful to think of television as myth because it is a central meaning-making device in all human societies (it is universal) and television is such a device that has become central to our kind of society. For Silverstone it is 'a gentle paradox' that television is distinguished only by its technology from other institutions in so-called primitive societies (Silverstone 1980: vii). Insofar as television redeems 'orality' it reconnects our society with older non-literate societies and their cultures, in which story-telling had a central role. If television is a central communicative medium for generating narratives of our selves and our world its function as such can be truly thought of as mythic. He had no doubt that television was important, involved in the very life-blood of contemporary culture (page 1). Supremely among the mass media, it articulated the mythic in contemporary society:

The mythic dimension of society contains traditional stories and actions whose source is the persistent need to deny chaos and create order. It contributes to the security of social and cultural existence. The mythic is a world apart, but it is also close at hand. It acts as a bridge between the everyday and the transcendent, the known and the unknown, the sacred and the profane (Silverstone 1981: 70).

This is the function of the medium of television. This is its message. And this is the message of Roger Silverstone. It is his most abiding perception of why the media, television especially, matter and are worthy of our serious attention and thought.

Myth and television both operate upon the terrain of common sense. In Silverstone's view, current sociological approaches to the vexed question of how to understand our commonsense understandings of the world were as infrequent as they were ill-informed. Marxist approaches to the unselfconscious man in the street and his view of things were likely to be judgmental and condemnatory (Silverstone 1981: 79). The less negatively inflected conceptualization of ideology-as-commonsense worked out by Antonio Gramsci (1971) was closest to Silverstone's view of its operation and function. He liked Gramsci's recognition of the 'good sense' in commonsense thinking as well as its embeddedness in custom, tradition and religious thought and experience (Silverstone 1981: 80). But rather than seeing commonsense as a site of contestation between different social forces in the struggle over social meanings and definitions, Silverstone thought of it as more fundamental and basic. It was necessary and unavoidable. It constituted our core knowledge not simply of the social world but of the natural and supernatural world. For most contemporaries the question of what it was to be human was always thought within and as coterminous with the social (human being is social being), but Silverstone's thinking was never constrained within the limits of the sociological imagination. The human world was part of something greater and intrinsically unknowable. A numinous edge to Silverstone's thought was unobtrusively present from the start. And thus his thought was never restricted to the 'merely' political. It was always more generous than that; less judgmental, less sure of itself, more gentle and uncertain in its efforts to grapple with the perplexities of living in the world. Those unavoidable perplexities are the common ground, in any society, of mythic commonsense thought which seeks to resolve them in order to allay our anxieties and allow us to act and thereby realize our common humanity. Thus, for Silverstone, myth was meaningful and redemptive rather than a meaningless delusion, and commonsense its necessary medium, rather than an irrational obstacle to be overcome. Common sense had its own logic and rationality and these were adequate to the tasks with which it must perforce engage (Silverstone 1981: 81).

Myth operates through the language of narrative, the latter being an aspect of the former. All three were thought at the time within the prevailing structuralist frame. The structuralist model for the analysis of language came from Ferdinand de Saussure (1959), the (then) recently re-discovered 'father' of modern linguistics. The structural analysis of narrative came from Vladimir Propp's widely admired study of the morphology of folk tales (Propp 1968). And finally the structural analysis of myth was provided by the work of the then highly influential French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss (1966, 1968). The power of the structuralist paradigm was thought to reside in its capacity to get some analytic purchase on the infinite diversity of everyday life and ordinary language by reducing them to much

smaller, finite sets of underlying symbolic phenomena. Language could be reduced to a principle of difference, a finite set of different sounds (phonemes) whose combinations were both arbitrary and conventional and which yet served to generate an infinity of possible permissible utterances in any language system. Likewise, all the world's stories could be reduced to a small set of grammatical narrative elements (the hero, the heroine, the villain, the helper, etc.) and a limited set of syntactic combinations of those elements which generated the morphology of the narrative—its story-structure or chronologic as it moved in time from a troubled beginning, through various complications and obstacles along the way, toward narrative resolution and closure. Finally the structural analysis of myth reduced the surface complexities of cultural life in all its concrete detail to a small set of irreducible existential binary oppositions—male/female, light/dark, raw/cooked, life/death, etc.—and then examined the ways in which such combinations were put in play in narrative.

Almost everyone in the '70s and '80s was a structuralist of some stripe but no one had yet undertaken such an analysis of television narrative when Silverstone applied himself to the task. It is not necessary here to show in detail how he went about it and I will not linger on his careful analysis of the morphology of his chosen text (113-142). More to the point is the actual text he chose and what, in the end, he found in it. Intimate Strangers had no special impact at the time and now, more than 30 years after its transmission, is utterly and irretrievably forgotten. That, perhaps, is the first point. It was taken as a good analytical object because there was nothing very special about it and so it served as an index of the ordinariness of television and its routine, everyday character. Silverstone deliberately avoided a more action-oriented kind of television drama—a thriller or detective series, for instance—whose narrative features would have been simpler and clearer and with more obvious folkloric elements. It would not be difficult, he surmised, to find, in such dramas, narratives of test and combat, alienation and integration, success and failure (113). But if an underlying mythic structure could be shown in a more complex and at the same time 'less noisy' television drama, of slower narrative pace, with more psychological depth, and in which nothing sensationally dramatic occurred ---if a reasonably serious, realistic narrative of contemporary life could be shown to have an underlying morphology such as Propp had found in fairy tales, and an underlying mythic structure such as Levi-Strauss had found in the stories of non-literate societies --- then the study of a single ordinary television text might justify the larger claims that Silverstone wished to make for the central role of television in contemporary Britain.

Intimate Strangers was broadcast in 13 hour-long episodes on London Weekend Television in the fall of 1974. It was shown in peak viewing time at 9 in the evening and was watched in between 4.3 and 5.8 million homes. The narrative focuses on the lives a middle-class middle-aged couple, Harry and Joan Paynter, who have been married for 30 years. Harry works for a publishing company, Joan looks after their house and garden in the country from which Harry commutes to a London office. They have two grown-up daughters. Gradually we see their lives, separately and together, begin to unravel. Harry, stressed at work, has a serious heart-attack at the end of the first episode and, as he recovers in hospital, is advised to be very careful in the future—no smoking, little drinking, plenty of exercise. When he returns to his job things do not work out. His relationship with Joan is increasingly strained. He nearly has an affair with an old acquaintance and begins to drink heavily. Joan's life is shown as largely separate from her husband's and, on a shopping trip to London, she too bumps into an old friend, now divorced, and has a brief affair with him. Their married life is tense and unhappy and going nowhere. Over a number of

episodes Joan and Harry face the possibility of separation and bit by bit steer back from the brink, beginning to come together as a couple with a shared life. They put their house on the market. Harry quits his job and they buy a bookshop in Tunbridge Wells which they plan to run together. Harry persuades Joan to try her hand at buying and selling antiques. Financial crisis looms as the house is hard to sell and the new business does not generate enough income. Harry's mother dies. His daughter, Kate, begins a new relationship. The house is eventually sold and Joan is beginning to make a go of buying and selling antiques. Secretly, Harry has designed a bungalow for himself and Joan which he plans to build with the money from the sale of their old house. Joan is delighted with the idea. There is a family party and the following day Harry shows Joan the plot of land he has in mind for their new house. 'Does Joan like it? She does. They kiss and then separately, but together, pace their way around the imagined building. They disappear into the suburban landscape as camera (and helicopter) climb high above them' (Silverstone 1981:123). An estranged married couple may have found a new, fragile intimacy with each other—at least for the moment they are no longer intimate strangers.

It is a kind of television drama more familiar 30 years ago than now; deliberately ordinary and low-key, a quietly told story of a failing marriage in a state of delicate renewal at the point that the narrative takes leave of it. What could an analysis of its mythic sub-structure reveal? Silverstone was keenly aware of the difficulties—he must tread a stony path between the banal and the ridiculous. It was one thing for Levi-Strauss to apply structural methods to the analysis of the narratives of primitive peoples, but quite another to apply them to the study of our own societies. Levi-Strauss himself had rejected the possibility of the structural analysis of contemporary culture, but Silverstone thought it nonsensical to dismiss out of hand the possibility of asking the same questions of contemporary culture as of pre-literate cultures (144). For him, the existential plight of human beings, the issues that confronted them individually and in their relations with others, were essentially the same in all societies. The universal concerns of mythic narrative arose from the fact, as he saw it, that it dealt with the universal and unchanging conditions of human existence, the grand implacable facts of birth and death, of sexual difference, the irreversible linear progression from infancy to old age that marks the narrative arc of the human life cycle. These were unavoidable human matters that escaped the compass of modern sociology but were grasped by myth. The four binary oppositions that Silverstone found in his narrative were between nature and culture, life and death, the places and spaces of 'here' and 'there,' and the gendered difference between women and men. These framed the narrative's unfolding chronologic. In Proppian analysis, what sets the narrative in motion, what initiates the course of action is an initial lack or absence of some kind which must be overcome by the narrative's protagonists through a series of trials or tests. At the outset, Harry and Joan are defined by lack; by the absence of health, the loss of his job and a failing marriage in Harry's case. In the course of the narrative both are tried and tested in their dealings with others and each other and both gradually come together as they find security in a new shared working life, as Harry recovers from his heart attack and as the marriage is physically and emotionally redeemed (153).

The various social settings in which Joan and Harry, their family, friends and acquaintances all live, their individual characters and character traits, the motives for their behaviors and their courses of action are all presented in an easy, natural, 'realistic' way so that all aspects of the narrative—characters, actions, events and their consequence—have a familiar, ready obviousness about them that mask their

mythic underpinnings. The crux of Silverstone's analysis is whether such an unassuming television drama can bear the weight of meaning that he wishes to find in it. One of the most obvious weaknesses of the structuralist enterprise was the arbitrariness of the codes assigned to the text in question as their structural underpinning. One admired, say, the sheer ingenuity of the five codes that Roland Barthes came up with in S/Z, his widely read analysis of a short story by Balzac called Sarrazine, and the imaginative ways in which they were used to decode it as a 'writerly' text (Barthes 1975). But if one wondered what warranted his choice of codes and what justified their application to the text, no good and convincing explanations came to mind, and none was provided by Barthes himself. They were simply there by fiat. And so, I rather feel, are Silverstone's. The four basic codes that he found in his text—the geographical, the techno-economic, the social and the physical—are assigned to the basic oppositions of proximity and distance, nature and culture, male and female, life and death. The codes do not quite 'fit' these oppositions and at times the analysis of how they work through the narrative seems contrived. But this is not necessarily a fatal objection to his enterprise. Arbitrary they may be in the ways that they are assigned and interpreted, but there is no doubt that these thematic polarities run right through the narrative, nor that they are among the basic existential elements upon which mythic thought operates.

If then I am not wholly persuaded by the detailed analysis of the mythic structure of Intimate Strangers, I remain impressed by what the aim of the project was and what it hoped to claim as its crucial argument. This is how Silverstone summed it up:

Television is a central cultural institution of our society. In its centrality it articulates the primary concerns of human existence and in ways which are themselves primary. These concerns, questions of life and death, of the familiar and the strange, of male and female, of nature and culture, are incorporated even into our own advanced cultures through the messages that television communicates. The forms of that communication are themselves basic… [T]hey consist in the mythic narratives, part myth, part folktale, and in magic and ritual. Television is not sacred; nor is it profane in any strict sense of the term. But the emotions and power of the sacred are preserved despite the secularization of television's manifest content. Television's effectiveness consists in its ability to translate the unfamiliar into the familiar and to provide frameworks for making sense of the unintelligible. It articulates differences but preserves that difference. And while it transcends the boundary of the acceptable and the known and seeks continually to extend it, it nevertheless marks that boundary clearly and unambiguously. Within that boundary we are secure and through television we are always within it (Silverstone 1981:181).

I have tried to situate The Message of Television in the time of its writing and to show that it was, in many ways, a product of those times. It is best read today not as an introduction to the structural analysis of television—few doctoral students would embark on such a project today—but as an introduction to its author's distinctive way of thinking which was from the start and continued to be seriously, thoughtfully and humanely engaged with our common life, our shared experience of the world and the central role of television in the mediation and communication of both. For Silverstone, everyday social life was a morality, first and last, and in his later writings he became more and more concerned with the ethical dilemmas posed by our increasingly pluralized and polarized world on the cusp of the millennium (Silverstone 2004). In Why Study the Media? Isaiah Berlin was invoked as a kindred spirit with whom Silverstone seemed to feel a special affinity. He admired Berlin's deep and liberal humanism which

he compared with Emmanuel Levinas's fundamental respect for the Other. He was especially touched by Berlin's sense of our shared humanity. It was 'at odds, perhaps, with contemporary received wisdom, but without it we are lost and without it the study of the media becomes impossibility' (Silverstone 1999: 3). What he found in Isaiah Berlin shines through in all of Silverstone's own work. It reveals a touching and humane intelligence somewhat at odds with contemporary received wisdom on the media, perhaps, but without which its study would be, while not impossible, at the very least, gravely diminished.

Biography

Paddy Scannell has recently moved to the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan after many years at the University of Westminster, formerly the Polytechnic of Central London. In 1975 he and his colleagues launched the first, and for some years the only, undergraduate degree course in Media Studies in the UK, and is a founding editor of Media, Culture & Society. He has written widely on many aspects of the media but is best known as a historian of broadcasting. His main publications include A Social History of British Broadcasting, 1922-1939 (Blackwell, 1991) (written with David Cardiff), Broadcast Talk (Sage 1991) and Radio, Television and Modern Life (Blackwell 1996). His latest book is Media and Communication (Sage 2007).

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