

Review: *Why Study the Media?* (Roger Silverstone).

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Silverstone's *Why Study the Media?* [hereafter *WSM*] is a difficult book to review, especially in such a short space. The content spans millennia of theoretical, analytical, and historical perspectives on our media, but it is none the less entirely contemporary and relevant in its focus. Silverstone's perspective is at times elusive because the book sets out, successfully I think, to answer the question posed in the title. But it does so by raising major questions in media studies, important questions, in a way that does not imply quick and easy answers.

The first aspect of *WSM* that strikes the reader is its language. It's a conversation, an oral discourse that has been written down. Silverstone uses punctuation like a bludgeon. The effect is remarkably the reverse of what might be expected. It creates delicacy where complexity, obscurity, and density have become the norm. The book is arranged in five parts. The first is an overview of the main areas to be addressed: 'experience', 'mediation', and 'technology'. The second lays out an analytical agenda which is divided broadly along the classical lines of 'rhetoric', 'poetics', and 'erotics'. The third synthesises Silverstone's conceptions of the media process, experience, and technology laid out thus far, organising the synthesis around the themes of 'play', 'performance', and 'consumption'. In section four, the focus slides wider to raise questions about mediation in domestic, community, and global contexts. Section five draws the expansive themes of the book together to propose an agenda for, as I see it, a political economy of media. Silverstone's final chapter, 'towards a new media politics', is an agenda concerned with media power: 'It is all about power, of course. In the end. The power the media have to set an agenda. The power they have to destroy one' (143).

The first section of *WSM* makes an important distinction that mitigates against the all-too-familiar extremes of medium theory and content analysis: we must firstly see 'media as a process, as a process of mediation' (13). Mediation is a human experience, and an important one. It is also a human product. The production and reproduction of media and everyday life are in inalienably discursive and dialectical relationships and thus are 'interdependent' (11). Issues and discourses of the private and public shift and blur because of mediated experience. The mediated discourses of everyday life are processes 'of classification: the making of distinctions and judgements', and the media is again central to these processes (12):

Therefore, in so far as the media are ... central to this process of making distinctions and judgements; in so far as they do, precisely, mediate the dialectic between the classification that shapes experience and the experience which colours classification, then we must enquire into the consequences of such mediation. We *must* study the media (12).

So that, in brief, is Silverstone's "why", a succinct rationale for engaging in media studies. An immediate question that springs to mind, though, is *what* constitutes mediation? The rationale is broad, abstract, and seemingly vague. How are we to define mediation? What, in human experience, is *not* mediated?

The whole book raises questions of this kind. One of its more diabolical features is that it *answers* those questions, but in a way that raises even more questions. For instance, we are shown that mediation moves meaning through and across space and time, linking and delinking spaces, places, and times. The process of mediation 'involves the work of institutions, groups and technologies' (15). It is 'the product of textual unravelling in the words, deeds and experiences of everyday life, as much as by the continuities of broadcasting and narrowcasting' (15). The most visible institutions of mediation claim 'the rights of representation' whilst, almost inevitably, infringing those same rights in their execution (16-17). Trust and power thus become central issues. The questions that *WSM* raises, as you may already see, increase at a high rate of compound interest. They are important questions. Good reasons to study the media.

The second section sets out to explain what needs to be explained –the *production* of enchantment. (29). For me, this is a most important contribution. While enchantment is often identified as an important aspect of media, rarely are the relations of production – institutional, interpersonal, and political – grasped as definitive elements in the process of mediated enchantment. Such a study is firstly sociological. As such, we need to keep in mind that 'emotions are as important as intellect' (30). Mediation seeks to 'persuade, please and seduce', and Silverstone chooses his analytical tools accordingly: rhetoric, poetics, and erotics.

It is bad manners to tell the end of a book, especially so for a reviewer. But *WSM* is unconventional, in style, structure, and content. Its end is not an end; it is a beginning. It tells us again why we should – *must* – study the media, and not merely as some cultural epiphenomenon. The media can no longer be considered marginal to economic activity, politics, social practice, culture, or to the most definitive aspect of human experience:

meaning. Media and meaning can no longer be considered to stand in accidental or arbitrary relationship to each other, as if the media were some vulgar semiotic scrim upon which the effluvium of society's fantasies rolled past. Mediation and meaning are inextricably interwoven moments in the production and reproduction of social consciousness. No longer can we afford to believe, as Horkheimer and Adorno did, that the media are dependent upon other more powerful institutions and industries. Today they are not merely the voice of our most powerful institutions and industries, they *are* our most powerful institutions and industries. The others now depend on them. In Silverstone's final analysis, the question posed by the book is one of power.

*WSM* is not a book for beginners. It is an elegant and quirky piece of scholarship that will be invaluable for graduate students or advanced researchers of new media. But it need not – should not – be seen as a university “text book”. It is, rather, a text, a source of multiple perspectives on multiple problems. It is a once-removed summary of a life's thought and experience about a very hard subject, expressed with deceptive clarity and simplicity. The analytical framework put forward in the middle of the book is at once both powerful and, I would imagine, difficult to operationalise at a single stroke. However, and this is important, the framework provides a mud map, a very delicate one, of the key entry points into what we need to understand about our media.

I have some minor quibbles here and there with some aspects of the argument, particularly in the later sections of the book. But to dwell on them here would be, as Marx put it, “theoretical bubble blowing” for its own sake. *WSM* deserves to be read, not only for what it says, but also for how it is said. It is as if Silverstone is trying to reintroduce oral clarity into the increasingly specialised print culture of media studies. That aspect of the book is important and interesting in itself. It is a book of ideas, and one that sparks ideas. It is a book of important and unanswered questions, and that, as I said, is its strongest and most valuable contribution.

Silverstone, R. (1999). Why Study The Media? London: Sage £14.99