Roger and Me(dia)

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We intend our title to invoke not only the sense with which Roger Silverstone's life work was intensely involved with the question of media, but also, at the risk of deploying a cringe-inducing pun that evokes the well-known title, Roger and Me, to echo, perhaps, the constant expression of closeness, even intimacy, that writers gave witness to about Roger in the inaugural issue of the *International Journal of Communication*. As so many of the tributes note, for all his rigor, intellectual engagement, and constancy of commitment, Roger was directly someone one had to think of as "Roger"—a warm, engaging individual whose joie de vivre was itself a proof of the delights to be had in the scholarly life.

Our fondest memory of Roger—because it so well seems to us to sum up Roger's investment in an infectiously enthusiastic interaction with culture—originated in our taking him and Jennifer in Los Angeles (where we then lived) to see Thai Elvis, a lounge-lizard singer in Hollywood's Thai Town whose campy performance combined cheesy Thai pop with Elvis impersonation. Not merely did Roger delight in the wacky experience—Los Angeles postmodernity at its zany, corny best—but it turned out that Roger knew all the Elvis lyrics by heart and was able to make the event a salutarily interactive one. No one, we said later, ever enjoyed Thai Elvis more. A trenchant observer of our contemporaneity, Roger surveyed the modern world and its media with sharpness and seriousness but also irony and wit. In person and in his writings, a whimsical slyness often comes through.

Take, for instance, a short diary entry in *Framing Science: The Making of a BBC Documentary* where Roger, in Boston with the documentary crew he has been observing, goes with the director to a "film which neither of us has heard of. It is called *E. T.* Martin [the director] wishes he had that kind of money."[1] This quick aside makes several points—for example, about the increasing importance in contemporary cinema of the Spielbergian blockbuster, about the ways in which media scholars and workers may not always be in touch with what's going on in the popular arts, about the relative weight given by society to escapist entertainment over educational efforts, and so on—but it does so with a pithiness that is keeping with a sardonic side in Roger. There was an endearing wryness to Roger; perhaps he might have even liked our bad pun.

But the transition from "Roger and me" to "Roger and media" also is intended to pick up on several theoretical arguments that ran through Roger's work. First, the very idea of transition: as is well known—and as Matt Hills most carefully delineates in his *IJoC* piece—Roger developed his theory of media within a framework that combined phenomenology, object-relations psychoanalysis, and language acquisition theory, along with sociology to examine how the individual subject grew up and into the world

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[1] Roger Silverstone, *Framing Science: The Making of a BBC Documentary* (London: British Film Institute, 1985), 82. Further references in text.

of media.[2] The life of any individual is a throwness-into-existence that involves both creative discovery and anxiety (a word that ends the first sentence of Roger's *Television and Everyday Life*: "Running through recent [and not so recent] theorizing on the nature of social life is a stress on the social as being a defense against anxiety").[3] Media constitute ritual practices—practices of journey outward from the self to the larger world—that enable and encourage individual subjects to deal with the larger sociality beyond them and, through that process, to become social beings and not just isolated monads. It is not simply that the subject grows psychologically but that in our world he/she does so, so much, through media, and not just through the content of media forms but through media objects themselves. Thus, in *Television and Everyday Life*, Roger picks up on Lynn Spigel's analysis of the impact of the television set as a material object in the value-laden spaces of suburbia and he makes clear that television's physical presence in domestic space was a key aspect of its resonant everydayness.

Finally, in its invocation of Michael Moore's influential documentary, our title can perhaps remind one of the importance of non-fictional modes of communication in Roger's work. Even *Television and Everyday Life*, which most often focuses on the role of <u>fictional</u> genres (most especially, for example, soap opera) in establishing the rhythms of cultural everydayness for today's social subjects, gave attention to news reporting and, in particular, to the ways in which catastrophic or otherwise momentous events would appear to threaten the business-as-usual relations that media forged with their audiences—only to then be contained by the resilient frames of those very media themselves.

But it is in his 1985 book, *Framing Science*, that Roger most directly and extensively engaged with non-fictional visual culture, and it is that book, relatively undervalued in the critical literature on Roger, that we want to focus on. No doubt, there are explanations for the somewhat overlooked status of this volume. First of all, one might make the assumption that the very fact that Roger dealt with an evidently ephemeral example of standard documentary programming might give the book a certain air of ephemeral specificity all its own. Specifically, who today would know this particular episode of a long-outdated, old-style BBC science series and who would have an interest in it? *Framing Science* might be said to belong to the genre of "The Making of" books but, in contrast to the glossy ones devoted to this or that classic film of cult veneration or this or that big budget Hollywood entertainment (predictably, there's a "*Making of E.T.*" book), *Framing Science* is about quotidian, even anodyne, television, the sort of thing the average spectator might have had an everyday acquaintance with (especially in the more heady days of top-down BBC pedagogy).

In addition, *Framing Science* is overlooked precisely because it is concerned with the lesser-studied area of documentary. Non-fiction film has long been considered a specialty topic in cinema and television studies, not as engaging a subject as fiction and not as profound in its cultural consequences as fiction. Here, it was Roger's mission to reiterate just how much it mattered that to a very large degree our scientific knowledge of our world—and our subsequent ability to engage scientifically and techno-

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[2] Matt Hills, "Essential Tensions: Winnnicottian Object-Relations in the Media Sociology of Roger Silverstone," *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007): 37-48. Further references in text.

[3] Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 1. Further references in text.

pragmatically with that world—came in the form of media-structured or media-constructed science. If the title of one of Roger's most famous books asks "Why Study the Media?" by reiterating to us that media are everywhere in that world, *Framing Science* reminds us that our very awareness of the contours of that world come to us in the frames of media. Media are not add-ons to some more fundamental relation to the real: they are constitutive of that real. In Roger's words, "When it comes to a question of the frame, and the definition not just of what, but of how, a particular corner of the scientific world is to be presented, it is television discourse which holds all the aces" (p. 163).

To the extent that it is centrally about media's role in structuring our knowledge of the everyday world we navigate our individual and social paths through, *Framing Science* appears primarily to get at such issues through the concrete example of a story told about one instance of documentary production, and this concreteness, which we argue is central to this volume's importance, might have seemed to theorists at the time (a particularly heady moment of high theory) as too experiential or empiricist. The down-to-earth materiality of *Framing Science* (where, to take just one example, Roger would in passing note the sights and sounds that wafted through the senses as he and the BBC crew moved from London to locations in the Philippines, Mexico, and India) might seem a world apart from the structural and high-theoretical rigor of his first book, *The Message of Television*, where Propp met myth analysis to present an inductive model of television narrative's ritual functions at a primarily textual level (which is not to say that *The Message of Television* doesn't also have its moments of concrete example and doesn't set out to move from text to cultural context).[4]

Not that *Framing Science* didn't evince its own suspicions of an untheorized empiricism that would simply recount production events without drawing deeper conclusions from them. To take one example, Roger explains toward the end of the book that an effective observation of the processes of television, even when keyed to a specific case of those processes, could reveal only so much. The empirical level of day-to-day production might have an anecdotally gripping visibility to it but the empirical did not deliver up its meanings—and its cultural implications—in any easy, direct or automatic fashion. There needed to be interpretation and analysis, and Roger pointedly notes how the very professionalism and devotion to industry practices of BBC administrators workers means that they can ask questions that went only so far. Thus, the explicitly theoretical conclusion to *Framing Science* opens with a quotation from Aubrey Singer, a BBC Head of Science Programming, about the extent to which television is a process (one, in this case, in which scientific ideas submit to the pressures and politics of an ideology of television as that which has to entertain as well as instruct), but Roger then declares the limits—in its declaration of normalcy and inevitability—of that professionalist notion of process and he proposes a more expansive definition of his own: "A word about process. It is unlikely that Aubrey Singer and I would mean the same thing by it. We would probably draw the boundaries of what is considered as relevant quite differently . . . We might not agree to include in our discussion those aspects of social and cultural reality which are expressed in the process of television but which cannot be observed directly, that is empirically. In this last aspect the process of television is not simply to do with the workings of a singular medium in a vacuum but with the workings of a singular medium and its creative workers in a profoundly

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[4] Roger Silverstone, *The Message of Television: Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Culture* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981).

complex and a powerfully intrusive contemporary culture" (p. 161). Note how the mention of "creative workers" confirms that Roger is not saying that there shouldn't, in a cultural theorization of media, be attention paid to the specific contributions to meaning and ideology of this or that individual subject. Quite the contrary, *Framing Science* on an early page argues that an effective theory and an effective concrete account of the production of signification in mass media had to be able to account for the fact that the politics of media are both (and simultaneously) constituted by what he terms "structural" qualities (that is, political values generalized to all media by virtue of their being mass media) and qualities of "personality and personal commitment" (p. 5).

Roger's study is centrally about a dialectic of structured conditions and individual agency within and against those conditions, and he necessarily then has to deal with specific forces and figures at work in media industries. The point, though, is that the visible evidence of that media work does not in itself adequately convey all the meanings—industrial, cultural, social, ideological and so on—that the work embodies. Theoretical articulation by the scholar who has observed the media creation but also reflected upon it is necessary to move the empirical into the conceptual. Published as film studies (and much of cultural studies more broadly) was beginning its turn from abstract theorization to historically grounded accounts of media industries (to take just one example, 1985, the date of *Framing Science*, was also the year that Bordwell-Thompson-Staiger's vastly influential *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* appeared), *Framing Science* shares with other works of the historical turn a concern with culture as something produced materially or concretely and by specifically defined historical agents. But it eschews much of the other works' sense that simply outlining agential activity empirically and anecdotally is enough. One primary risk of mere narrative account or description of an industry's operations and of the operations of specific agents within it is, as Roger reiterates, the potential for apologetics or even implicit approbation. In other words, the problem of empirical description of how media workers work is that it can naturalize their activity and make it seem as if the world of dominant media industries is right, natural, and inevitable because rational and effective. In fact, even within the select media industry—in this case, BBC science television and the creative personnel devoted to it—there is, as Roger shows, conflict among creative figures and he thereby suggests that the industrial machine of media production may not be as streamlined to perfection of product as all that. And the seemingly pragmatic and professional decisions and activities that creative workers engage in at the immediate level of the tasks that confront them are incompletely understood if the analysis remains at that level: Roger's point is that the very activity of professional engagement in a field is itself expressive—in no doubt tangled and overdetermined fashion—of larger ideological cultural currents.

To take just one example, Roger notes in *Framing Science* how the BBC crew out in the field to film its science documentary will keep an eye out for what he terms "convertible images": that is, images "which allow the unfamiliar, the new, the different, the beautiful or the ugly to be communicated effectively cross-culturally without any evidence of the aesthetic transaction ever having taken place" (p. 64). At the ground level in which creative professionals imagine that what they are doing in seeking such images is just doing their job, these professionals, along with the ethnographer's descriptive account of them, might provide the impression that this is all quite natural, a bit of media industry business as usual. But moving outward from descriptive account to larger analysis—and critique—Roger notes that the emphasis on the striking image is already itself ideological in its very valorization of an ideal of the

powerful image and it is especially politically fraught in the context of a First World film-making that is plundering the Third Word for exoticized images that precisely it can convert to its Western needs. As Roger puts it, "the images that are created and fixed in the process of filming are motivated by a whole series of conscious and unconscious considerations which have everything to do with, as in this case, western or First World aesthetics, generic conventions of film-making, culturally defined and stereotypical expectations, standards of technical excellence, and the particular personality and the specific skills of the operating, lighting cameraman" (p. 64). Thus, the very professionalism of the "right" and perfect image is itself an ideology, and no mere empiricist ethnography unaccompanied by critique and analysis could ever hope to delineate ideological processes inherent in image-making.

In a sense, *Framing Science* engages in an operation of inductiveness that is the inverse of what happens in the process of BBC film-making chronicled by the book. Broadly, *Framing Science* shows how the conventions of professional documentary production take knowledge of the world and turn it into a media knowledge made aesthetic, entertaining, and gripping, in which pedagogy is traded in large part for a good show. It is clearly the aim of the book, then, to explain, by its very chronicle of the professional conversion of science into media image why and how media need ideologically to engage in that conversion. By unveiling what lies behind the impression of inevitability and naturalness in media industry products, Roger's account restores a critical knowledge—one hesitates to call it "scientific" knowledge since he is never claiming that somehow there is an ideological purity of science before media take it over—to the analysis of creative work in modernity. Television, in this case, has tried to hide its traces— "the work of mediation cannot be acknowledged and must not be recorded" (p. 64). Roger's very act of accompanying the crew in his guise as critical intellectual then enables him to offer the "record" of what transpires behind an activity that seeks ideologically to hide its own actions. As he describes his own practice in the astute self-reflexive chapter that ends the book, "There is a sense in which any sociological inquiry, however expressed, is a radical one. At the heart of it is an attempt to get inside and unravel another's world, to make sense of it, to challenge its taken-for-grantedness, to observe and comment and maybe enlighten" (p. 203).

Even though this last chapter begins with Roger comparing his effort in the book, insofar as it is a structured act of mediation (in this case, of his participant-observation of a film's production), to the mediatory effort of the very film-makers he has been observing, it is clear that Roger sees film-making and sociology as quite divergent in their effects and in the means they utilize to achieve those effects. For example, the BBC's process of production progressively involved the substitution of story and drama for argument, whereas Roger's book progressively moves from narrative account to theoretical conceptualization. It is a minor point but nonetheless a useful one to note that *Framing Science* employs no images (other than a "convertible" one on its front cover) and opts instead for the discursive power of its words as analytic tool.

Insofar as it makes its larger argument through the specific example of a case study, *Framing Science* has a dialectical quality—from concrete to abstract, and then back again in its last pages to the concrete embeddedness of the sociologist in the world he/she observes and conceptualizes—and so we would contend that it has a greater importance in Roger's oeuvre than it might first seem. Roger clearly had a strong investment in—if not preference for—abstract theoretical reflection over concrete historical

analysis. This is not to say that relatively theoretical volumes like, say, *Television and Everyday Life* aren't also, at some deep structural level, making arguments about history; clearly, for instance, *Television and Everyday Life* has as its largest context such directly material factors as suburbanization, increased media concentration, changes in gender relations in the domestic sphere, the blurring of the identity of television as a specific signifying practice with other media practices in an age of digital convergence, and so on. But the overall intention of such a volume seems less to make concrete arguments about particular historical situations than to set out the range of theoretical questions within which specific situations might then be approached. Roger clearly wondered enough about his theoretical propensity to make it the subject of reflection in the first page of *Television and Everyday Life*: speaking of himself as "inveterate theorist" (p. ix), he sets out to explain that the book contains little empirical material and is dominated instead by an "ability to generate theory."

Certainly, Roger's concern theoretically to pose questions—and to clarify the field out of which productive questions could be generated—had something quite salutary about it. The generosity which many scholars found in Roger was a generosity of theoretical openness in which he would stake out areas of reflection but not dogmatically declare how any specific reflection should proceed. This leads, in a book like *Television and Everyday Life*, to a book rich both in interrogative sentences and in deliberate sentence fragments that announce themes rather than offer a fully articulated stance on them. This open-endedness was consequential: as Matt Hills explains in his tribute analysis of the persistence of Winnicottian motifs in Roger's oeuvre, a theory of cultural meaning as connected to activities of transition manifested itself in Roger's later work as an increasing investment in the particular open-endedness that diverse readers would bring to the act of reading and making their own use of cultural meanings. In Hills's words, "As Winnicott's place in Roger's media theory shifted somewhat, this version of object-relations became less a guarantor or co-ordinator of 'the answer' to questions posed by television as a medium and increasingly a marker of paradox and irresolvability" (41). In this respect, it is noteworthy that Roger returned to *Framing Science* toward the end of the 1990s and critiqued it for its relative downplaying of questions of the role of the reader as actively constitutive of textual meanings.[5]

But it is noteworthy too that in this later reflection back on the earlier work, Roger suggested also that he had perhaps not given enough attention to the political economy of the media context for the BBC documentary he had analyzed. In other words, at the very same time that Roger had come to call for more attention to the indeterminations in the act of readerly consumption, he was also reiterating the need to offer concrete analysis of the determinations in the act of media production. A rejection of dogmatism in his case never meant a non-commitment to seeking out the concrete, effective place and power of media in everyday life. The importance of *Framing Science*, then, is that it suggests how Roger himself might answer the general questions he would pose to media scholars. The title of one of his most well-known books pointedly asks why we must study the media, but it remains deliberately open on the question of how that study might be conducted (which is not at all to say that Roger felt that anything goes; his was a questioning governed by rigor and seriousness). In its use of a concrete case in which

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[5] Roger Silverstone, "Rhetoric, Play, Performance: Revisiting a Study of the Making of a BBC Documentary," in Jostein Grispud, ed., *Television and Common Knowledge* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 71-90.

social agents interact with and through institutions, Roger offered a strong demonstration of how he, specifically, might do media analysis.

In many ways, *Framing Science* can be seen as his most political book. There are, for instance, striking pages about the presumption of First World cultural workers when they move into the Third World and assume it is a fount of convertible images passively waiting to be turned into fodder for Westernized— and Westernizing—stories. As Roger puts it in several poignant lines, "In a quite literal way the film crew will enter an unfamiliar world and will return armed with information and emotions gathered and inevitably transformed both by the means of their collection and by their passage back—finally—to the cutting room. But there is also clearly an assumed right of passage . . . Part of that right is expressed in the movement of First World television programmes into the Third . . . Equally significant, however, is the assumption of a right of passage, as in this case, for a First World film-maker to enter, to judge, and to make a film about the social, political, economic or the scientific in another's culture . . . [I]n the nature of things, it must be questioned, as it increasingly though contentiously is, by governments and peoples of Third World countries whose images of themselves are often dependent on the judgments made by strangers" (p. 53).

So much of what today's cultural studies can attend to in media analysis—the uneven access to meanings by various social constituencies, the role of authority in setting out agendas of signification, the ethnography of everyday agents, and, especially, the ideological nature of the work of culture (which includes the work of its creative figures and institutional forces), the interaction between story and rhetoric in media textuality, and so on—finds striking anticipation in *Framing Science*. We can think of no better tribute to Roger than to encourage continued engagement with this important, early expression of the themes and arguments that would remain central to his work, rendered in this first instance in productively concrete, incisive, yet always dialectical form.

Biographies

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