

On Morality, Distance and the Other Roger Silverstone's *Media and Morality*

DANIEL DAYAN

Institut Marcel Mauss, CNRS & EHESS

"Distance and presence coincide in ways that challenge fundamentally the necessary proximal relations that are assumed to be a precondition for an ethical life." — ROGER SILVERSTONE¹

Two centuries ago, philosophers asked some difficult and apparently cynical questions about the concern we should feel on learning about earthquakes in far away China. Since we could do nothing about the earthquakes, and since we could neither rescue the victims nor alleviate their pains, what was the point of turning ourselves into echo chambers of their distant sufferings?

Two recent books provide a spectacular response to such questions. Both stress the role of media in redefining 'distance,' in redeploying its very phenomenology. Both are crucial books, and not only in regard to media. These are Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering* and Roger Silverstone, *Media and Morality*. Luc Boltanski's book (Boltanski 1999) has been immensely influential. Roger Silverstone's book promises to be no less so. It is a book meant to be disturbing. Mixing erudition, insight, eloquence and, above all, force, it characteristically reads like an epistle or prophecy. Reaching us from the other side of death, *Media and Morality* is more than a last will. The book is a warning, almost a threat.

The proposed review is a tribute. It is also the continuation of a discussion with a friend, a friend whose conclusions I did not always accept. This is why this review combines unequivocal admiration and clear areas of disagreement. I hope both will be manifest. I also hope that my portrayal of a complex book is not only faithful, but accurate. It addresses three major questions:

(1) Why this book? Why should media matter so much? What is the sort of media knowledge that guides Roger Silverstone in his current diagnosis and in his call for media morality? Is journalism, as Silverstone succinctly puts it, too important a matter to be left to journalists?

(2) What is the thrust of Silverstone's conversation with contemporary moral philosophy? Who are the major voices that Roger Silverstone invites into his discussion? Why are Arendt, Derrida, Levinas, Ulrich Beck and Edward Said included rather (or more than) Habermas, Walzer or Rawls? Is Silverstone's book a proposal for media ethics or an indictment of the enlightenment? If so, isn't there a risk of Silverstone speaking in the name of the very universalistic values he challenges?

(3) What are Silverstone's privileged solutions? Are they self-evident?

In my critical engagement with the book, I shall try to identify three problems:

First, Silverstone's position is one of moral maximalism *à la* Levinas. Can such a version of morality be translated into rules or guidelines? Can it serve as a basis for deontology?

Second, Silverstone's approach to dialogism tends to privilege a monumental version of *the other*. Yet, if we descend from the philosophical stage into the actual world of news, do most depicted situations fit the highly stylized dramaturgy of 'I' and 'Thou'?

Finally, Silverstone proposes that one should adopt a 'proper distance' when it comes to depicting humans. Directly related to his stand on the 'other', proper distance is equated by him with an absolute proximity. Is 'proximity' the only (moral) answer to Silverstone's question?

1. Moralizing the 'Mediapolis' and Silverstone's Diagnosis

Roger Silverstone's moral investigation concerns what he calls the 'Mediapolis.' A largely normative notion, the Mediapolis is 'the mediated public space where contemporary political life increasingly finds its place, both at national and global levels.' The notion is largely inspired by Hannah Arendt, and by Ulrich Beck. Ulrich Beck provides its cosmopolitan character: 'individuals are rooted in one cosmos but in different cities, territories, ethnicities, hierarchies, nations, religions - all at the same time. This creates not exclusivity but rather an inclusive plural membership.' Arendt offers her view of the polis as transcending the geographical: 'the polis is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together . . . no matter where they happen to be.' In other terms, Arendt offers her version of the public sphere. This version strongly differs from that of Habermas, in which 'only reason, and a singular and narrow kind of reason at that, determines the viability of discourse and the possibility of action.' As opposed to Habermas' construct, Silverstone's mediapolis is a site in which 'communication is multiple and multiply inflected. It is open to the circulation of images and narratives.' It is also open to a characteristic combination of moral and dramaturgic concerns. Mediapolis is an Arendtian space of appearance: 'the space where I appear to others as others appear to me.'

Boundary Work and the Construction of a Moral Universe

This view of the polis is of course ideally suited to the analysis of media performances. The point of Silverstone's book is that such performances always involve a moral dimension. Silverstone's mediapolis is a place (1) 'where we will or will not find ourselves alongside the other in his or her dignity'; (2) 'where we will or will not hear a discourse of multiple voices'; (3) where we will escape or not the 'consequences of the failures of representation.' In a word, the media are responsible for defining 'the moral space within which the other appears to us.' This moral space is not just one among others. It actually supersedes all others. 'The media ... are the principal means of connection (and disconnection), of

symbolic inclusion (and exclusion), indeed of communication (and miscommunication) between human beings. They are constructing our moral universe.'

They do so, by constantly performing 'boundary work.' 'The media, in their centripetal phase, articulated the boundaries of national and linguistic cultures . . . And now, in an age where the media are more centrifugal . . . this boundary work, far from disappearing, persists . . . in the centrifugal assertion of identities and connectivities.' Boundary work is omnipresent. 'Inscriptions of difference' are to be found 'in any and every media text or discourse: from the crude stereotypes of otherness to the subtle and not so subtle discriminations of dramatic characterisation.' In other terms, boundary work amounts to an 'endless playing with difference and sameness.' It specializes in 'discriminative practices in terms of self and other.'

Media's Unacknowledged Responsibilities

Boundary work involves an immense power and an immense responsibility: a responsibility that the media fail to acknowledge. 'This is not to suggest that journalists should be better than the rest of us as human beings (though why should they not be?), only that they should recognize that what they do. . . has consequences for the rest of us as human beings.' Perhaps indeed, journalists should be better human beings than the rest of us. 'What else should we expect of those whose responsibility it is to report the world, and in the reporting make it available to us as a political and social reality?' Yet, since they are not, Silverstone offers an alternative. The media is too important to be left to themselves. The alternative is 'regulation.'

Toward Regulation

Regulation discourses have been traditionally concerned with the protection of home. This emphasis was misplaced. According to Silverstone, regulation should rather deal with the protection of media environment. 'If we drop a model of effects for a model of resources, the impetus for regulation should concern the nature of what is shown in the public sphere' and not only the nature of what the showing may trigger. Silverstone's regulation is directed towards the media as a semiotic ecology. In a move reminiscent of Todd Gitlin's *Media Unlimited* (Gitlin 2001), Silverstone's regulation is meant to control 'environmental standards of media practice.'

The reference to an ecologic model for the media is a major theme of the book, whose title could have been: *Why regulate Media-ecology?* 'Mediated cultural environment is as significant ... for the human condition as the natural environment is ... I would go so far as to say that the security of the future of the physical environment is going to be of limited value unless and until the mediated symbolic one is equally secure.' In a gesture of calculated hubris Silverstone proposes a regulating of the world media environment, suggests 'the equivalent of a Kyoto for the media.' He proposes 'treaties between, for example, broadcasters, both national and transnational, to ensure reciprocity of address, and the presence of the other in otherwise alien media space.'

Of course regulation is a dangerous notion. We know that 'in a benevolent society it can enhance the quality of the democratic process . . . In less benevolent societies, it can, and will, both effect and legitimate the opposite.' Yet, Silverstone's emphasis is less on the 'how' of regulation, than on the 'why' of regulation; less on regulation itself than on the moral principles that should guide it.¹¹ What are such principles?

2. Key Notions: Distance, Hospitality, Responsibility

Not unlike John Peters or Paddy Scannell, Roger Silverstone is willing to bring themes of contemporary moral philosophy to bear on media scholarship. Not all themes are treated as equally urgent. 'Justice' is discussed in reference to John Rawls, but briefly. 'Truth' is discussed in reference to Bernard Williams' notion of 'truthfulness,' but Silverstone's analysis of truthfulness (respect for and orientation toward truth) remains a secondary theme, probably because it was already discussed in his earlier work, in reference to the notion of 'Trust.' On the other hand, a long chapter is devoted to Edward Said's 'counterpoint' which for Silverstone transcends the analytic strategy of the literary critic. Counterpoint is not only an attempt at reading literary texts against the grain, but a 'moral principle' of cultural expression, an invitation to 'the play of media voices none of which should be silenced,' a manifestation of 'the dignity of difference.' Silverstone's reading of 'Counterpoint' introduces us to the themes to which he devotes his full attention. Three of these themes will be discussed: 'distance,' 'responsibility,' and 'hospitality.' Let me first propose, for each of them, a careful reconstitution of Silverstone's argument.

Distance

Distance is not 'just a material, a geographical or even a social category.' It is a moral category. Indeed, the media 'have always fulfilled the function of creating some sense of proper distance, or at least they have . . . claimed to be able to do so.' For Silverstone, they in fact failed by either incorporating or demonizing the other. This other was sometimes pushed 'to a point beyond strangeness, beyond humanity'; and he was sometimes drawn 'so close as to become indistinguishable from ourselves.' In both cases, the resulting distance was morally unacceptable and the media performance was torn between symmetrical immoralities: the 'immorality of distance' and the immorality of sameness or 'identity.'

In order to avoid these twin immoralities, Silverstone suggests a 'Kantian enlargement of mentality beyond the individual and the solitary self.' This is Arendt's notion of Imagination. As Arendt puts it, 'Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective.' It is that which allows us 'to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand without bias and to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair.'

Thus, for Silverstone, 'proper distance' is that which permits adopting the position of the other, and 'imagination' is that which serves the purpose of distancing oneself from oneself. In regard to the

other, 'proper distance' thus means no distance at all. What is 'proper' is the erasure of any distance. Instead of a 'proper distance, Silverstone could speak here of a 'required proximity.' In fact, this is exactly what he does when he stresses 'the *degree of proximity* required in our mediated inter-relationships . . . for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility.' What sort of responsibility?

Responsibility

In a distinction taken from Hans Jonas, Silverstone opposes formal and substantive responsibility. Formal responsibility is 'the responsibility I have for my own acts, those aspects of life and deed for which I can be held accountable.' Substantive responsibility, on the contrary, is 'responsibility for the condition of the other.' It is 'in some sense, the responsibility of a parent for a child, as long as they both shall live. It is also the responsibility of the statesman.' This very different kind of responsibility is an expression of power and extends with the extent of the power that I have. 'Substantive responsibility' is meant 'to ensure the continuing existence of mankind.' It is characteristically 'non reciprocal.'

In order to illustrate the notion of 'substantive responsibility' Silverstone offers the examples of the paterfamilias, of the statesman. These examples are relatively easy to understand, since they involve not only the notion of a shared order, but also, albeit indirectly, a form of reciprocity. In these examples, substantive responsibility is the responsibility of the powerful vis a vis the powerless, or at least, that of those who have more power, toward those who have less power. But this dimension of reciprocity is not required by the definition.

The mediapolis is agitated by perpetual situations of struggle and by frequent shifts in media power. In a struggle, I am certainly responsible for my deeds. Am I responsible for the actions undertaken by my enemy? Am I responsible for all what my enemy does? If so, is there any limit at all to my responsibility? By bringing in Hans Jonas, Roger suggests that there are no such limits. I must take responsibility for the acts of the other, even if those acts are directed against me. Is such a conception of responsibility capable of guiding earthly - rather than heavenly - behaviour?

Hospitality here is a linguistic and philosophical affinity between *ethics* and *home*, between *ethics* and *ethos*. 'Insofar as it has to do with the ethos, that is the residence, one's home, the familiar place of dwelling' writes Derrida ' . . . ethics is thoroughly coextensive with the experience of hospitality. . . . Hospitality is culture itself and not simply one ethic amongst others.' For Derrida, 'hospitality goes to the heart of our relationships with others. Indeed it is constitutive of such relations.'

Hospitality means 'welcoming the other in one's space, with or without any expectation of reciprocity.' Hospitality is an obligation with no corresponding right. 'The law, of course, sets limits on who will be welcome and under what terms; . . . in some sense the law is by definition inhospitable.' This is why, 'drawing on Kant's discussion of hospitality in *Perpetual Peace*, Derrida distinguishes between *unconditional* and *conditional* hospitality, the first beyond, the second within, the law. True hospitality, in the context of city and state, for Derrida, is unconditional . . . breaking all bounds, unconstrained by the

forces of law and urban and national self-interest.' How then can one translate Derrida's philosophy of hospitality into guidelines for the mediapolis?

Media Hospitality involves 'a willingness to ensure that ... the bodies and voices of those who might . . . be otherwise marginalized will be seen and heard on their own terms.' Of course, in the mediapolis, unconditional media hospitality is almost impossible. Even when it is not flatly denied, media hospitality remains parsimonious, cautiously granted: 'editorial controls remain in place. They work to constrain those speaking either by marginalizing them in the schedule . . . or on the page, or by limiting the rights of access to the relatively safe.'

Terrorism is a case at hand. Let us imagine, Silverstone asks, 'the disinterested, or fair, reporting of terrorism in a society recently terrorized . . . What kinds of distance are appropriate in such representation? Do we listen to the terrorists on their own terms? Can we hear what they may have to say?' Silverstone has no doubt that we should. Of course, he notes, hospitality 'can be abused . . . Hospitality is dangerous. It is not without risk.' But 'hospitality has much in common with true forgiveness.' 'To give hospitality to the terrorist' and 'to forgive the unforgivable' are the true expressions of the primary ethic.ⁱⁱⁱ

In order to justify the granting of hospitality to face and the voice of the terrorist, Silverstone turns once more toward Derrida. 'Hospitality, in its pure and unconditional for - writes the philosopher - does not involve, nor is it dependent on, an invitation. It is only when someone enters our lives, and is welcomed, without having been invited, that we can truly accept the otherness of the other.' 'In media terms, as well as in material terms' Silverstone concludes there is a difference, between the hospitality of *invitation* and what Derrida calls the hospitality of *visitation*. It is the latter which is increasingly required in a truly cosmopolitan society: 'There has to be space for the unbidden and the uninvited, both in the material as well as the mediated world.'

3. A Critical Engagement

The Choice of Maximalism

How does one move from Silverstone's prophetic principles to the earthly implementation of these principles? How does one move from morality to ethics? From ethics to deontology? From deontology to guidelines, laws, and international agreements? This is not only a hard matter in general, but an especially difficult task, given the nature of Silverstone's morality. No one, says Silverstone, will provide us with another cosmos. Is his approach realistically capable of saving this one?

Roger Silverstone's book is about moral choices, moral preferences, moral dilemmas. The reader is constantly asked to choose. But he is not simply required to choose between options that are moral and options that are immoral. He is also required to choose between positions that are moral and positions that are even more so. He is required to choose between hospitality by 'invitation' (that is conditional hospitality), and hospitality by 'visitation' (which is unconditional). He is required to choose between

'perfect obligations' (obligations balanced by rights) and 'imperfect obligations' (pure obligations, involving no equivalent rights). He is required to choose between formal responsibility (I am responsible for my actions) and substantive responsibility (I am responsible for my actions *and also* for the actions of the other). In each situation, Roger Silverstone not only privileges a moral position, but within the range of moral possibilities, he privileges the position I would call maximalist: hospitality by visitation; imperfect obligation; substantive responsibility. Silverstone's morality involves no ifs and no whens; no conditions and no reciprocity. Given Silverstone's professed aims (moralizing the mediapolis) the choice of this maximalist, intransigent, absolutist approach to morality might be self-defeating. I can hardly imagine how any international covenant could turn its back on reciprocity. But what is at stake here is more than moral maximalism.

Bauman: Ethics Against Society?

Silverstone's choices are highly influenced by Zygmunt Bauman's *Postmodern Ethics* (Bauman 1992). Silverstone largely endorses this book's attack on modernity. Should the failures of modernity be attributed - as Habermas would put it - to modernity's unfinished project? Are they, on the contrary, consubstantial with modernity itself? Silverstone endorses the second option. 'The failures of modern media' he writes, 'are in fact the failures of modernity tout court.' In Silverstone's as well as in Bauman's conception of morality, responsibility is the cardinal value. This value is embraced against society, against reciprocity, and if necessary, against justice. Silverstone puts it bluntly: '*Postmodern Ethics* ... offers ... a ... defence of responsibility rather than, and contrary to, justice.' Bauman's argument is that 'modernity's appropriation of reason, its institutionalisation of process and procedure, its embodiment of reciprocity as a principle of social life, indeed its very sociality, has systematically undermined the possibility of moral action and responsible behaviour.' Morality can only genuinely emerge from the refusal of social order, as order ... And since justice is social, it too, perversely enough, gets in the way.'

In other terms, the very notion of reciprocity, the very notion of justice comes in the way of care, of responsibility, of our obligation to the other.

Pluralism or Universalism

Together with this romantic conception of a morality set above society, against and beyond any requirement for reciprocity, Silverstone manifests an unexpected sympathy for anti-Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century. Their romantic nationalism is seen with indulgence if not altogether fondly since they are taking sides against 'the universalist tendencies in the Enlightenment, the misplaced omnipotence of reason'; since they reject 'the enlightenment's de jure refusal to acknowledge the distinctiveness, indeed the irreducible distinctiveness, of human cultures.' Silverstone has particular praise for 'Vico and, above all Herder' whose 'pluralism ... was both distinctive and revolutionary': 'the belief not merely in the multiplicity, but in the incommensurability of the values of different cultures and societies, and ... the incompatibility of equally valid ideals.' This 'incompatibility of equally valid ideals,' or

to put it in other terms 'the equal validity of incompatible ideals' introduces us to absolute relativism as, paradoxically, the basis of absolute moralism.

I am not sure I am ready to follow Silverstone – or Bauman - in their rejection of modernity. I am indeed fearful that the remedy they propose might be worse than the illness. But my main disagreement with Roger Silverstone is not about his endorsement of Baumanian positions. It concerns his own central themes. Two such themes are essential to him – and to me. These themes are 'otherness' and 'Proper distance.' Their discussion will conclude this essay.

Who is the Other?

Roger Silverstone writes: 'No presumptions should be made about an unreflecting, universal, generalisable, uncomplicated we. The "we" both is, but crucially is also not, the plural of the "I".' I suggest that no presumptions should be made either about an unreflecting, universal, generalizable uncomplicated other. Yet Silverstone's book is replete with such presumptions.

Who is the other? And why is there only one, as if the use of capitals subsumed every possible alterity? Silverstone makes it very clear that the other is not the one I have invited, but whoever comes to me, invited or uninvited. This is not really where I disagree. My point is: why the singular? Why not the plural? What about the claims of many others to be recognized? What about the faces of many others to be seen and the voices of many others to be listened to? What about the fact that there are simultaneously many ways of being not me? The Turk may be my other. But the Armenian is not me. The Janjahid is my other. But the Darfour civilians are not me. The Balkan Moslems might be my other. But the Serbs are not me. This entails a very simple empirical remark. In most situations involving the 'mediapolis,' focusing on the dual pair of 'Me and the other' is misleading. Instead of pairs, there are at least triangles. Obvious in Boltanski's description of distant suffering, such triangles are not to be found in this book.

In other terms, Silverstone's moral approach tends to do exactly what he accused the media of doing. It quietly divides others into big others (treated as such), and smaller others (dissolved altogether, or treated as if they were just an extension of 'me'). As a result, Silverstone stages a big Levinasian face to face, a theater of alterity, a climactic encounter that feels like the final shootout in a western movie. Of course this is an admirable shootout, a sublime encounter of I and Thou. It is not the sublimity of the encounter I object to. I object to its dualistic character.

Abolishing some of the others in our moral world certainly simplifies it. Do we need this simplicity? Do we need to be treated to a succession of majestic others (sooner or later to be dethroned)? Mediapolis is not a dance nor a date, nor the culminating duet of an opera. Perhaps the following remark is that of a Frenchman and the result of wounded narcissism (the French no longer believe they are the center of the world.) I nevertheless want to stress that, more often than not, the other has another and this other is not me.

The Issue of Proper Distance

Acknowledging the multiplicity of others has direct consequences on the notion of a 'proper' distance. Roger Silverstone's proper distance is that which encourages responsibility, that which brings me into contact with the humanity of the other. Faced to this otherness, proper distance means in fact no distance at all, except from myself, a self from which I am encouraged to abstract myself by an act of imagination.

But if, instead of being confronted to some major, monumental, generalized OTHER, I acknowledge that there are many others awaiting my response at any given moment, the calculation of a proper distance radically changes. Proper distance can no longer be offered as a synonym for proximity. It now defines the point from which I am capable of hearing the respective claims of many others. Proper distance involves the reintroduction of actual distance. It is the amount of distance needed if one seeks to go beyond a myopic, fusional relationship with some privileged category of others.

Put differently, proper distance needs to be *equitable* distance. Of course this equitable distance - this 'equidistance' - reintroduces a notion that Silverstone, under the influence of Bauman, has downgraded. Media morality is not merely a matter of responsibility. It is also – pace Bauman, pace Silverstone – a matter of Justice. The multiplicity of others is, after all, what Mediapolis is about.

Biography

Daniel Dayan is Directeur de Recherche at the Institut Marcel Mauss (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) and professor of media sociology at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris. In 2005, he was a resident fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies, Hebrew University, and an Annenberg Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania. In 2006, he offered the 'freedom of speech' lectures at the University of Bergen. His most recent books are *La Terreur Spectacle* (Paris, INA-De Boeck 2006) and *Televisao, Das Audiencias aos Publicos* (with J.C. Abrantes, Horizonte Books, Lisboa, 2006).

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ⁱ This and all subsequent quotations from Roger Silverstone are taken from *Media and Morality* (Silverstone 2006).

ⁱⁱ *On regulation and content*: Silverstone insists on avoiding regulating content. 'Regulations ... should not, except indirectly . . . focus on content . . . Any regulation that transgresses this fine line [between procedure and content, does so ...] at its peril.' Rather than dealing with content, 'regulation's rules are rules of engagement, of process and of discrimination.' I am not convinced that Silverstone's regulations are leaving content alone. I am not convinced that any international agreement promoting respect for the voice and face of the other (other cultures, other media, other countries) can realistically avoid issues of content. It seems to me, on the contrary, that the whole argument of Silverstone's book is about content. The presence of the other is matter of content; reciprocity of address is a matter of content; ethical framing is a matter of content. And, as he notes himself, the 'international structure of regulation' he proposes is geared toward 'public and commercial providers of media content.'

ⁱⁱⁱ *On terrorism*: Silverstone's example contains many assumptions that call for debate: (1) should we listen to terrorists on their own terms? This presupposes that the communication of terrorists is not strategic; that they wish to talk to us; that we are their 'you'; that we, as hearers, are not made instrumental. Michael Walzer (2002, 2006) would certainly disagree. (2) Should terrorism serve as a case of testing our 'hospitality by visitation'? I would suggest that 'visitation' comes in many forms, some of which are more lethal than others. The knock on my door is not always a prelude to exploding it. But I have already discussed these points - and a few others - with Roger Silverstone in *La Terreur Spectacle* (Dayan 2006).