

A Recent Chapter In The Messianic Tradition?

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An interest in religion was an important if implicit part in Roger Silverstone's life and thought. This was clear to me in the few but always meaningful conversations he and I had between when we first met in 2000 and last saw each other in 2006.

The most sustained conversation was over a pizza dinner in London when we half-whimsically decided that we could organize the field of media studies into three wings on the basis of religious orientation. The first focus was the interest in the means by which mass communication can stage rituals over space and time and knit identities together via technologies of social and sensory organization. The Catholic wing of media studies, as we called it, might take "mass" as a noun as well as an adjective in a phrase like "mass communication," and was well represented by scholars such as Marshall McLuhan, James W. Carey, and the Dutch mass communication scholar, James Stappers. Noting that the media events studies of Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz figured in this wing, we decided at once that preference for a particular religious-intellectual orientation doesn't necessarily follow from one's manifest religious identity. Durkheim himself, who Dayan and Katz follow, proves the best example. The descendant of a long line of rabbis in France, he nonetheless produced a vision of society as held together by collective representations in what might be seen as a transmuted reflection of the Catholic culture of France. Research on audiences and their ability to interpret media and culture against the grain of dominant institutions and ideologies we saw as a transposition of the Protestant celebration of the inner light inalienably possessed by every believer. If the Catholic orientation celebrated the potential magic and mystery of mediated ritual, the Protestant orientation celebrated an anarchistic carnival of suspicion and inversion of central authority in which ordinary people burst through priestly pomp with reason, truth, and oppositional readings of their vernacular bibles. It wasn't hard to find in Habermas' distrust of political spectacle one version of this leaning, and our scheme imagined the whole tribe of Birmingham cultural students, in a remote and ironic way, rehearsing the classic Protestant rebellion against dominant top-down ideologies and defense of the cognitive powers of ordinary people. (E. P. Thompson's radical Methodists had already made this link for us.) The priesthood of all believers had become the articulation-busting, sign-inverting power of all viewers. Finally, in the fascination for the ways of the media text itself, in all its dodges, camouflages, richness and resonance, its ideologies and neuroses, utopias and truths, we found an implicitly Jewish resonance. Marx's critique of ideology, Freud's psychoanalytic exposé of the unconscious element in mind and culture, and Derrida's deconstruction, for instance, arguably reflect modes of textual interpretation developed in the rabbinic tradition and its heretical branches (Handelman, 1982). Roger affirmed his appreciation and voted, in the last instance, for the third orientation, although he had done distinguished studies of both technologies and audiences along the first two lines. As a Latter-day Saint (Mormon) I was granted a certain polygamous relation to all three wings, as Mormonism is a religion with a philosemitic theology and history, a strong centralized ecclesiastical hierarchy like Roman Catholicism, and a strong Protestant cultural context and habitus, especially in its work ethic and streak of perfectionism. I count this as one of the more memorable conversations I have had, and an example of how two minds can think more productively together than apart.

Roger's interest in religion, and his fascination with the question of what it meant to be Jewish in Great Britain (Silverstone, 1998), became more pronounced in his last years, and his final book, *Media and Morality*, might be read as a religious work at some level. This book seems part of a countercyclical, more affirmative wave in British media studies that seeks less to indict media for their dominant ideologies and capitalist configurations than to see them as potential agents of public solidarity and ethical arousal. Something of this spirit can be seen in John Ellis's work on witnessing, in which television is not seen as an agent of ideological mystification but rather as a moral gadfly, stinging its viewers into a knowledge of things they might prefer to avoid, and in Paddy Scannell's vision of radio and television as indispensable constituents of the modern lifeworld's intricate ordering of space, time, and experience (Ellis, 2000; Scannell, 1996). *Media and Morality* is fully conversant with all the abuses and failings of the media as agencies of truth and morality, and yet it carries out a dogged quest to salvage shards of hope from the historically novel condition of instantaneous global communication. One senses that he completed the book on borrowed time and wanted to make it a full statement of what he had to say.

I like to think that Roger would approve of my reading of the book as a utopian vision of a global order of media and justice that fits into the long and distinguished tradition of Jewish messianic thought. In the messianic age, said the prophet Isaiah, "all nations will flow to the mountain of the Lord's house ... for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:2ff). (Note how Zion is figured as a worldwide communications center.) Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism and messianism, showed how much modern and secular progressive social thought owes to the anticipation of a just world sketched by the Hebrew prophets. In contrast to the mainstream of Christian apocalypticism, which sees the millennial day ushered in by a more or less catastrophic second advent of Christ who will vanquish the wicked in one fell swoop, the Jewish messianic tradition focuses on the gradual creation of a righteous society that will be ready to receive the Messiah. Jewish messianism has always been deeply concerned with global social justice (Scholem, 1971). Marx is surely the greatest secular heir of the tradition's utopian vision, as the messianic Marxist Walter Benjamin (a close friend of Scholem) clearly saw. Something of the same tradition, more ethically inclined and less militant, is not hard to find refracted in the generally more centrist authors that Roger builds upon in *Media and morality*: Hannah Arendt, Zygmunt Bauman, Isaiah Berlin, Jacques Derrida, Hans Jonas, Emmanuel Levinas, and Michael Walzer --- all of whom plumbed the sadness of twentieth-century Jewish experience and defended some version of cosmopolitanism as an ethical position that shelters otherness without violence. *Media and morality* envisions the "emergence and sustenance of democratic, civil society, globally, nationally, and locally" (162). The book's vision of the "mediapolis" might take its place as the most recent installment in the messianic tradition, particularly in the cosmopolitan ideal that "all nations" will come together under a single, peaceful planetary tent.

In the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, religious devotion is often expressed as a critique of false religion. (Marx's dictum that all criticism starts as the criticism of religion could have been said, in a different key, by almost any of the ancient biblical prophets.) Chapter 3 of *Media and Morality* discharges this obligation most fully, with its criticism of Bushism's absorption of the dangerous apocalypticism of right-wing Christianity in the United States. It is not hard for most of us to concur heartily with Roger's critique, but part of the special animus here is that Bushism follows precisely the wrong kind of global messianism: catastrophic, violent, monomaniacal, and inhospitable to otherness

of any kind. This chapter underscores that *Media and Morality* is not simply an act of willful hope: it is exceedingly well-informed about the hindrances to any achievement of a global just society.

Roger's simultaneous normative and descriptive ambitions give the book its particular flavor of ambivalence, both in argument and style. The argument is flirtatious almost, coy, hesitant, shy --- it comes on strong and then backs off at once. Almost any affirmative idea will get qualified by a simultaneously critical idea that sits waiting in the wings. Indeed, the self-described mission of the book is to keep both eyes turned to both the "realities" and "possibilities" of global communication (vi). A couple of sentences capture the poles between which the book shuttles: the tragic acknowledgement that "We are dealing with great imperfection" (37) and the utopian possibility that in a world of compressed space and time, "access to information is infinite" (7). The style, in turn, is idiosyncratic and elegant, both subtle and occasionally frustrating. Roger always had a knack for stylishly deployed sentence fragments, perhaps reflecting his admiration of French literary style. But here the style is fugal, to pick up on his metaphor in chapter 4. He defines counterpoint as two notes at once (85), each enriching and commenting on each other, and this book not only describes a contrapuntal sensibility: it enacts it. His modus operandi in *Media and Morality* is not so much dialectical as juxtapositional: there are always two or more voices at once, one loyal to the sobriety of the reality principle and the other open to the intoxications of hope. He saw both the institutional inertia of media industries and the historically unprecedented possibilities of a world in which television could make Afghani blacksmiths the proxy acquaintances of British citizens. His voice announcing a cosmopolitan order always blends with another, more nagging, voice informed by detailed knowledge of the realities of media texts, institutions, and reception. A characteristic moment of his ambivalence: "Let us not be too quickly seduced by Kant's utopian cosmopolitanism. But let us not walk away from it too quickly either" (137). Another wittily wistful moment captures the same "will to believe": "[Ulrich] Beck's vision [of Europe as a microcosm of global society] is appealing. It may even be accurate" (102).

Roger would have wanted us to read his utopian cosmopolitanism with the same mixture of suspicion and seduction; indeed he meticulously constructed it so as to be free of any fake expectations. He knew from psychoanalysis that an easy cure is no cure at all. After all, the history of messianism is largely the history of false messiahs. But it is also the history of humanity's struggle for social transformation. Roger Silverstone has done us the lasting service of teaching us how to see media not only as clotted vehicles of maya and mayhem, but also as pointers to a better world. He showed us what it is to wait for the messiah while making sure not to get stung one more time.

Biography

John Durham Peters is the F. Wendell Miller Distinguished Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa, USA. He is the author of *Speaking into the Air* (Chicago University Press, 1999), and *Courting the Abyss* (Chicago University Press, 2005) as well as a coeditor of *Canonic Texts in Media Studies* (Polity Press 2003) and *Mass Communication and American Social Thought: Key Texts 1919-1968* (Boulder, 2004).

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