

Home, Work and Everyday Life: Roger Silverstone at Sussex

KATE LACEY

University of Sussex

...it is in the everyday, and above all in the detail of the relationships that are made with others and which constitute everyday life's possibility, that our common humanity is created and sustained. [My argument] also presumes that it is through the actions and the interactions that make up the continuities of daily experience that an ethics of care and responsibility is, or is not, enabled. I argue that no ethics of, and from, the everyday is conceivable without communication, and that all communication involves mediation, mediation as a transformative process in which the meaningfulness and value of things are constructed.ⁱ

Introduction

When I reflect on Roger Silverstone's time at the University of Sussex (1991-1998), I think of him as a colleague, mentor and teacher, of his commitment to interdisciplinarity, and of his work to create an interdisciplinary home for the study of culture and communication. At the time, much of his research was focused on the role of the media in the home - specifically the interconnections between public communication and the ordering of private space. I think there are connections to be drawn between his work on everyday life and his everyday work, and it's something to do with the extraordinary ability Roger had to make connections across disciplines and traditions, and to create a feeling of belonging and connection between people, a feeling of home.ⁱⁱ Looking back, and sharing memories with others who worked and studied with him at Sussex, it is possible to see more clearly the connections between Roger's research, his work with colleagues and students, and his own sense of home.ⁱⁱⁱ

A place called home

'Home' was a powerful category in Roger's work. Much of his most influential research was involved with an investigation into the complex ways in which the media, and television in particular, become embedded in the temporal, spatial and interpersonal organization of the home. He understood the home as a mediated space, and the media as a domesticated space. As a researcher he was interested in 'crossing the threshold' to examine the realities of watching television and to question the commonplace assumptions about what audiences did with television. A telling phrase he used about the ethnographic trends in audience research of the mid-80s was that television research was 'leaving the lab and coming home' (Silverstone, 1996). He was also interested in the recurrent ways in which the home was represented in the media, especially in sitcoms and soaps. Indeed, he was interested in the ways in which the invention of broadcasting had 'rediscovered' the home in the modern world (Silverstone, 1999: 93). Radio, television and the new media cross the boundaries of public and private, permeating and breaching the confines of the domestic, extending the reach and impact of the home. He was also a key protagonist in opening a debate about the *domestication* of media technologies, the processes by which 'untamed' new technologies come to be familiar and embedded in everyday life. The home is the primary site, he

argued, where 'the functional and cultural dimensions of media are worked through' (Silverstone, 1994: 176). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he was concerned with the home as a site for the emergence, practice and renegotiation of an ethics of communication.

It was precisely the familiarity, the ordinariness, the *everydayness* of the domestic realm that was the impetus of his research. His interest was in the home as a complex and contradictory social space, a physical and psychical place, a place of both work and leisure, a place where gender and generational politics are played out, a place where identities are formed, a place of both conflict and security, a dynamic space of comings and goings. He understood the home as a construct, a set of meanings imposed on a space to turn it into a place of belonging, or at times even a place to escape from (Roger was keenly aware of what was at stake in idealizations of 'home'). Those meanings are imposed via complex and often conflictual processes of negotiation among those involved in producing a place called home, be that a household, a neighbourhood, a nation, or, perhaps even, as I shall suggest below, a place of work. A home, in this sense, is a phenomenological category, a place of identity formation and a projection of our selves and so, crucially (as I am keenly aware in the process of writing this paper), a category bound up with memory (Silverstone, 1999 p.92). It is a category to be understood alongside, but distinct from, the social category of the family or the economic and cultural category of the household, however much they might be experienced as fluid and interconnected in modern everyday life.

The category of the household is particularly interesting in Roger's work, because of his insistence - against the grain of postmodernist fashions at the time - on understanding the household as a *moral* economy.^{iv} The household, as an analytical category, he argued, has to be understood as both an economic *and* a cultural unit. In both realms, the household represents a location for the meeting of the public and the private, and particularly as a location for the transactions of economic and social relations between the two spheres. There is a moral dimension to these transactions inasmuch as the household economy is one that operates according to a set of values and priorities created and negotiated within the personal and private culture of the household - a different set of values and priorities from those operating in the public, formal economy (which is also, in these terms, a moral economy).^v Drawing on insights from anthropology, Roger therefore understands the domestic sphere as 'a distinct social and cultural space in which the evaluation of individuals, objects and processes which form the currency of public life are transformed or transcended once the move is made into private space' (Silverstone, 1995: 12). The materials and resources that household members have at their disposal to define and organize their lives come both from the 'private' world of the participants' own values and from the public world of commodities and objects. The media have become central to a household's achievement of its own identity, integrity and security, and are also key in enabling members of a household to participate and engage in public affairs. Roger was keen to get beyond the tired dichotomy of active or passive audiences (Silverstone, 1994 pp.169-70). He wanted to stress the engagement of the audience as *agency* in the sociological sense - a perspective which raises the prospect of that agency as a potentially *ethical* engagement.

It was here that the concept of the 'double articulation' of media technologies in economy and culture was key, a concept that recognised the distinctive ways in which information and communication technologies function in the household. All manner of technologies can be articulated into the fabric of

everyday life as material and symbolic objects - as commodities - but there is a crucial second articulation that operates via the mediated content of broadcasting and other communications technologies that serves to enhance our 'competence' in *all* aspects of contemporary culture and consumption (Silverstone et al, 1992: 21). The role of the media in the meeting of public and private is, then, *doubly* articulated in the practices of everyday life, as both material artifacts *and* as conveyors of meaning (exchanged in both directions between public and private), and although, as Roger acknowledged, it proves difficult to isolate and measure empirically, it is here in this dynamic transactional system, where the processes of domestication can be identified.

The concept of 'domestication' was one that emerged 'to grasp the nettle of socio-technological change' (Silverstone, 2006a: 231) and to offer a powerful analytical framework to counter models of technological determinism. From this perspective it was possible to examine the processes of commodification, objectification, incorporation and conversion that are at play in the social application of new technologies - the translation of the new into the familiar. One of the projects to which he dedicated his huge energy and enthusiasm while at Sussex and beyond, was the EMTEL network through which he developed a tight-knit group of international scholars to research the processes of domestication under the rubric of European Media Technology and Everyday Life (see Silverstone, 2005).

In his recent reflections on the concept of domestication, Roger acknowledged that the specific and idiosyncratic ways in which any particular individual or household engages with the media from their particular moral perspective might barely register in the bigger picture of media systems in the normal run of things, but that the 'search for salience' in this dimension should go on, since the *experience* of that specific engagement is of material significance to those involved and, moreover, 'could very well intrude into the generalities of the formal economy in ways that would become both unexpected and disruptive' (Silverstone, 2006, p.239. This is an argument that sums up so much of Roger's work, combining a sincere respect for human experience at the level of the individual, while recognizing an inescapable dialectical connection between that private, domestic experience and the wider social and political world.

At home in interdisciplinarity

The degree of interdisciplinarity in Roger's work on the home is remarkable. The publishers categorized *Television and Everyday Life*, for example, as media/communication studies. It is that, of course, but also much more besides. His mobilization of the notion of the domestic is one that draws substantially on sociology, anthropology, economics and phenomenology, but there are also explicit references in his work to history and cultural geography, textual analysis, social psychology, psychoanalysis, critical theory and philosophy. Elsewhere his writing references still more diverse sources. At one level, this is an expression of his voracious reading and appetite for knowledge – he describes himself in the preface to *Television and Everyday Life* as 'an inveterate theoriser' [p.ix]. At another, it is an expression of his understanding of the deep complexities and contradictions of the media as a prismatic object of study. But it is, I think, most significantly an expression of his attempt to take seriously the challenge to engage with the media holistically and dialectically, to think them through as always both technologies and texts, in both their public and private dimensions, in their historical specificity and in the context of their part in a common humanity.

Perhaps academically Roger felt most 'at home' in Sociology and Media Studies, but he gladly and adventurously went traveling across many other fields in his quest to find an approach that was adequate to the task of understanding the media – although he was also, it should be said, often perplexed and enraged by the way in which the media, so central to modern experience in his view, could be almost entirely neglected in so many of the prevailing critiques of contemporary society (Silverstone, 1999: 144).

It was fitting, then, that Roger should take up a Chair at the University of Sussex, an institution which, since its inception in the 1960s, has prided itself on its commitment to interdisciplinarity. Roger became the first Professor of Media Studies at Sussex when he arrived in 1991 from his previous post in the Sociology Department at Brunel. He joined Nancy Wood, Andy Medhurst, James Donald and Janice Winship in building up a series of successful and innovative degree programmes that were committed to an interdisciplinary approach to the media,^{vi} connecting Roger's background in sociology with others' more textual, historical and theoretical approaches. I was appointed the following year, fresh from a doctorate in German History – in fact, Roger poached my application from the panel appointing to the position in German for which I had applied - so my own first sense of Roger's approach to Media Studies at Sussex was one that did not necessarily recognise conventional disciplinary boundaries. The undergraduate degree programme that developed was distinctive at that time in its holistic and interdisciplinary ambition. It was a programme that sought to overcome the easy separation of sociological and textual approaches, that drew on both empirical and interpretative methods, that combined theoretical enquiry with experience of media practice, that genuinely engaged with the various approaches of cultural studies, political economy, critical and psychoanalytic theory, and that took seriously the remit to study all media of communication, from billboards to broadcasting, print media to film, as well as the new information and communication technologies that were just emerging as a major force. In particular, the media were always to be contextualised in terms of the broader social history and in their relation to domestic, national and global audiences. This was underscored by the way in which the courses in media studies were combined with 'contextual' School courses.

Until recently, the University of Sussex eschewed conventional departmental structures, and so Roger became the Chair of the Media Studies 'Subject Group' which worked across two interdisciplinary Schools, the School of European Studies, and the School of Community and Cultural Studies. This framework fostered engagement with colleagues across many different subject areas, from International Relations to Art History, from English to Anthropology. Just as importantly, it brought students together in the seminar room from a wide variety of intellectual traditions to discuss concepts in common across disciplinary boundaries.

Roger clearly thrived in this environment, enjoying the exchange of ideas and the possibilities for innovative teaching, and he wanted to extend and enhance this intellectual environment at the postgraduate level. His first big project was the introduction of an MA in Media Studies which he co-taught with James Donald and which offered a rich encounter between the politics of representation and the politics of media and everyday life. The interdisciplinary ethos certainly also lay at the heart of his plans for the Graduate Research Centre in Culture and Communication (or 'CulCom' as it quickly became known), which came into existence in 1994, with Roger as its first Director. It brought together researchers and students in the fields of Media and Cultural Studies, Music, English, Women's Studies,

Social Anthropology, Sociology, History of Art and Museology. His intention was for the Centre 'to provide a different and less constrained environment for the conduct of interdisciplinary work at graduate level' and to 'stimulate research and scholarship.'^{vii} He was particularly committed to defining a space for work across the social sciences and humanities, the separation of which he described as a 'kind of atavistic binarism which is totally unacceptable' (ibid, p.4).

The CulCom project wasn't by any means plain sailing, beset as it was by the usual combinations of institutional politics and funding constraints, but Roger brought to it an energy and enthusiasm – and no small degree of ambition and political nous - that did make things happen. Perhaps the most productive aspects of the Centre were the 'themed years' that Roger instituted, that brought scholars together from all over the world for symposia and seminars on themes such as 'Cultural Encounters: Communicating Otherness'; 'Telling Stories' and 'Performing Spaces.' The themes were deliberately broadly sketched precisely to encourage the meeting of different perspectives. There were contributions from every level of the academic community, from internationally acclaimed scholars - like Homi Bhaba, Michael Taussig, Sheila Rowbotham, George Steiner, Stuart Hall - to students just embarking on their doctorates, or working on their MAs. There were writers in residence and visiting research fellows, and a range of seminars, conferences and informal events open to all. Some of the papers from these events, together with other research from the Centre, were published in another of Roger's ventures, the Sussex Studies in Culture and Communication series at Routledge.

The book he edited within that series, *Visions of Suburbia*, is, in his own words, "very Sussex."^{viii} He called it, 'the product of an interdisciplinary environment that really does work' and claimed it would have been 'inconceivable,' at least for him, anywhere else (Silverstone, 1997 pp.ix-x). The book comprises a collection of essays addressing the question of the production, consumption and representation of the suburban across and between historical, geographical and cultural perspectives. It opens with a personal reflection on his own suburban upbringing, and his own contribution is primarily concerned, once again, with the notion of 'home' in this hybrid, contradictory space between the urban and the rural, the product of modernity that is not quite properly modern, the 'soft under-belly of the contemporary' (Silverstone, 1997: ix). This space - at once individualising and conforming, both privatised and public, both desired and resented – that is so characteristic of modern experience, and yet so neglected in accounts of modernity - has, Roger contended, a clear elective affinity with broadcasting in both its form and its content:

'Life in the suburbs is, at least on the surface, an ordered life [...] in which social distance, propriety and good taste mediate the daily and weekly rhythms of home and work. [...] Television culture is itself suburban in its preoccupations and in its forms, above all in its ordinariness [...] it feeds, and feeds on, the structural anxieties and repressions of life in suburbia while at the same time providing narrative, mythical, resolutions of the anxiety it creates' (Silverstone, 1995: 16).

In terms of Roger's writing career, this apparent detour through the suburbs is, then, on closer inspection, actually no such thing. Suburbia proves instead to be a space that brings together several of the major threads which weave with remarkable consistency through the broad canvas of Roger's work: a

concern with the domestic, with communication and everyday experience; with dialectics, with narrative, with myth, and with morality.

His next book, *Why Study the Media?*, was published shortly after his departure from Sussex to the LSE, but was in many ways the product of his time at Sussex and the intellectual encounters he had there. Reading it, for those who worked and studied with him, was to find echoes of courses and conversations, lectures and debates, reworked into an eloquent synthesis that demonstrated the scope and subtlety of his interests. In essence, it was a passionate manifesto, calling on those outside the field of media studies to recognize the centrality and multidimensionality of media to modern experience and to reject once and for all the notion that the study of the media is a frivolous, easy or irrelevant occupation. In its strong sense of purpose, its erudition and the sheer breadth and originality of its approach, it surely is one of the best responses yet produced to the antagonistic question of the book's title.

In its final chapters, he began to amplify the themes of morality, ethics and a new media politics that had always been present in his work, albeit not always so centre stage - witness his long preoccupation with the moral economy of the household, the *agency* of the media consumer, and the suburbanisation of the public sphere. Now he was beginning to address head on the profound questions about the impacts and implications of the ways in which the media invite our intimate engagement with otherwise distant others. This was a problematic that he had begun to grapple with during his last year at Sussex - the Subject Group's parting gift to him was the collected works of Emmanuel Levinas - and that pointed to the direction he would take in what, so sadly, was to be his final book, *Media and Morality* (2006b).

The ethical thread in Roger's work was not, however, confined to his writing, as will become clear, I hope, when we consider the connections between his work on everyday life and his everyday work.

Home, work and everyday life

One of the definitions of the home that Roger offers in his chapter on the subject in *Television and Everyday Life* is that it is 'a product of our practical and emotional commitment to a given space' (Silverstone, 1994: 45). Reading this definition in the light of remembering Roger's life and work, it strikes me that the practical and emotional commitment that Roger brought to the institutional frameworks within which he worked, and which he inspired in others, also produced something of a sense of home, or at least a sense of belonging and a spirit of shared endeavour. It would be impossible to explain exactly how he achieved this, this fierce sense of loyalty and belonging, but there are connections with the themes he elucidated in his writing, themes such as the development in everyday practices of an ethics of care and responsibility, the blurring of the public and private divide, and the ethics of hospitality.

When I first arrived at Sussex, despite my being new to the profession, the university and the subject area, I soon found out that Roger had an extraordinary gift for making everyone feel included and for eschewing formal hierarchies, ensuring that everyone felt their voice would be heard. He took the responsibilities of his position seriously, and that seemed to inspire an enormously productive sense of shared responsibility. These qualities I know extended to his approach to teaching. He could lecture with

conviction and passion, but he was also generous in listening to his students and always open to engage in debate. Most of all, he would always seem to be genuinely *interested* in other people.

Without wanting to overstate or oversimplify the case, it is not entirely surprising, then, to those that knew him, that the moral philosophy to which he was drawn - that of Levinas, Berlin, Arendt - and which was increasingly to shape his own work, was a philosophy which was grounded in the fundamental existential condition of being with, relating to, and being responsible for, other people. It is a philosophy in which the fundamental human condition of plurality opens up the space for communication, a space of 'inter-est,' literally a space between. We can communicate because of what we share in common; the urge to communicate is generated in our difference, in our plurality. Communication, *mediation*, is impossible, then, to separate out from what Roger called 'the struggle for the moral life' (Silverstone, 1999: 140), a struggle that takes place in everyday life, and 'above all in the detail of the relationships that are made with others...' (Silverstone, 2002: 761). Of course one of the places where we build relationships with others is in our everyday lives at work, and I think that Roger felt that very keenly, and perhaps this helps explain why he was involved throughout his career in building up departments, setting up research centres or establishing networks, in other words, creating spaces where people he worked with could feel intellectually 'at home.'

It is striking that one of the ways in which he achieved this sense of home, was precisely by welcoming into his own home the people he worked with. One of my very first appointments in the new job was to join my new colleagues on a visit to Roger's home in Oxford where we enjoyed a very convivial lunch with his family and then relaxed, talking, lazing and playing an impromptu game of French cricket in the garden. Without it being contrived or forced, it was clearly Roger's intention that we forge a relationship with each other as private individuals before forging - and in order to forge - a productive working relationship. That was especially important as the subject group was so new, and there needed to be real collaboration in designing and teaching the curriculum. Later, there would be times when Roger would invite us to the cottage he rented in Piddinghoe to share ideas about how developments in the field should be incorporated into our team-taught core courses. Most memorable, though, were the annual Christmas parties that Roger and his wife Jennifer would throw for all his colleagues and postgraduate students, occasions which would, again, underscore that sense of making connections between home, work and play.

Within the University as well, Roger was keen to carve out spaces for informal dialogue and connection. Research seminars would usually end with a drink and a meal, faculty and postgraduate awaydays would often involve overnight stays off campus, and there was a weekly 'Happy Hour' for all CulCom students, an open session where students could offer a 'small talk' about their work in progress, or just exchange ideas. In her personal tribute to Roger, Maren Hartmann, who studied with Roger on the MA in Media Studies in CulCom and then worked closely with him on the EMTEL project at Sussex and beyond, wrote the following, which I think sums up the kind of memories shared by so many of his students and colleagues:

He was great at showing us the connections between our ideas - connections we were not able to see. More importantly maybe, the dinners will always remain in all our memory - as will the laughter, the

egalitarian nature of these networks, dancing and other such events. Roger was great at making everyone feel welcome and at home.^{ix}

Of course it's appropriate in paying tribute to focus on all that was positive, but if these allusions to the workplace as a place to feel at home seem in general too saccharine, then it is worth remembering that Roger himself was always clear about the stresses and contradictions that characterise home life as much as the love and mutual respect. The home can at times be a site of tempers and tensions, of argument and alienation. Home is not always an easy place to be, but it is a place we *care* about, in one way or another.

There is a sentence in *Television and Everyday Life*, in a discussion about the representation of family dynamics in television fictions, that resonates for me in this context:

In the transition from home to work family becomes community in which the *gemeinschaft* values that have their origin in the family are extended and transformed. In this transition [...] the tortured complexities of the family are being left behind in a compensating image of the workplace as home (Silverstone, 1994: 43).

Making connections: a life's work

In short, Roger seemed incapable of thinking about the kind of work he was engaged in, - the mediation of ideas and the establishing of communities of scholars - as separate from a broader notion of communicative ethics which understood the intimate and inevitable connections between public and private worlds. At least, this is how it seems as I now, in Roger's own words, try to weave 'the private threads of the past...into public cloth' (Silverstone, 1999 p.126). At the time, I probably thought Roger just liked a bit of a party and a good conversation. But this in itself is an indication of how much it was in Roger's personality and personal ethos to engage with people, and make real connections with them. There was no sense in which this sociality was forced, whether for personal or institutional gain, as is sometimes the case with those who know how to 'network.' Roger was, if nothing else, a man of great integrity. His work ethic was grounded in a deep respect for other people that brought with it both responsibilities and great expectations. He not only inspired us in this way, he won much love and respect in return.

Roger Silverstone's approach to the study of the media was holistic and profoundly humane. Above all, he was interested in the communicative ethics of everyday experience and their interconnections with media technologies. His approach to his colleagues and his students was similarly humane, and he engaged with all of us in a way that recognized the connections between our work and our sense of ourselves, between our public and our private lives, and between the different places we feel at home.

Biography

Dr. Kate Lacey is Senior Lecturer in Media and Film at the University of Sussex, UK. She is the author of *Feminine Frequencies: Gender, German Radio and the Public Sphere, 1923-1945* (Ann Arbor:

University of Michigan Press, 1996). Her recent publications have focused on the 'modernisation' of listening and listening politics.

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ⁱ This passage is taken from the published version of the last paper that Roger gave at Sussex, at the Research Seminar in Media and Cultural Studies, 22nd October 2002. (Silverstone, 2002: 761)

ⁱⁱ It is for these reasons that I have chosen to use Roger's first name throughout this piece, despite prevailing academic convention.

ⁱⁱⁱ I have had many conversations with former colleagues and students of Roger's in the months since we received the news of his untimely death, but I am particularly grateful to Caroline Bassett, Andy Medhurst, Janice Winship and Nancy Wood for their input into and comments on this paper.

^{iv} An insight first elaborated in Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley (1992).

^v It is worth recalling Roger's own review of this early work on the moral economy in light of his later work on media and morality: 'I confess that in earlier discussions of the moral economy, I was uncomfortable

with the notion of the moral. I was discussing morality with a very small and non-judgemental *m'* (Silverstone, 1999: 140).

^{vi} The degree had initially been launched as a joint programme with English in 1989 under the direction of Nancy Wood. The MA in Media Studies began in 1993.

^{vii} Interview with Roger Silverstone conducted by acting Student Representative Jenneth Parker in *The Culcom Newsletter* no.5 Spring 1996, pp.3-5, here p.3.

^{viii} <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/whosWho/rogerSilverstone.htm>. Accessed 23rd October 2006

^{ix} http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/whosWho/Tributes_To_Roger_Silverstone.htm Accessed 23rd October 2006.