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Beyond the audience

Teletubbies, *play and parenthood*

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ABSTRACT This article considers the place of the 'everyday' and 'practice' in media ethnography and audience research in cultural and media studies as well as this tradition's relationship to textual analysis. Drawing on an auto-ethnographic study of the author's family, the research considers the way in which they made meanings with the preschool children's television programme *Teletubbies*. The analysis considers how television viewing is regulated discursively across a number of different sites that constitute 'parenthood'. In this respect, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' is developed to account for the ways in which the textual and discursive address articulates with, develops and reproduces the family's childcare practices. The research also presents a method of analysis that explores the micro-example to 'write singularity' and suggests the benefits of exploring the ways in which meanings are made beyond the moment of reception. As such, a case is made for the need to move beyond conceptualizations of 'the audience'.

KEYWORDS *audience, auto-ethnography, childcare habitus, parenthood, pedagogy, play, practice, singularity,* Teletubbies

Writing singularity

The cultural and media studies tradition of media ethnography has long since recognized the importance of situating media in the context of everyday life. For example, both David Morley (1986, 1989) and Roger Silverstone (1989, 1994) have been particularly vocal about debates that attempt to rethink the relationship between text, response and context. Some 15 years ago, they argued that the problem that media ethnography faced was to formulate television's meanings beyond the strict focus on the text (Morley and Silverstone, 1990). They argued that we need to account for the manifestly quotidian interrelationships between the text, the technology and the contextualized audience practices within which those texts and technologies are situated (Morley and Silverstone, 1990). Shaun Moores made a similar point, suggesting that we needed to 'consolidate our theoretical and methodological advances by refusing to see texts,

readers and contexts as separable elements' (1990: 24). He argued that it was time to bring together ethnographic studies with textual analysis, a conceptual move that would recognize 'the interaction between textual features and contextual situations' (Moores, 1990: 24–5). Earlier still, Paul Lindlof and Thomas Traudt (1983: 266) suggested that we needed an agenda for investigating 'the environmental opportunities provided by the mass media that make up the many options of commonplace activity' and 'the content uses of media that provide meaning for integration into everyday interactions'.

These are fine words and together they signalled a vigorous agenda for media ethnography. However, it is questionable to what extent the subsequent tradition of audience research has met these agendas. For example, on one hand, studies of the patterns of domestic media consumption (e.g. Fisherkeller, 2002; Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Gillespie, 1999; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992) tend to take a somewhat insular look at the context of the domestic arrangement around the television set. Here, media texts are almost entirely absent. On the other hand, studies in the discourse analytic tradition of audience research (e.g. Barker et al., 2001; Buckingham, 1993, 1996, 2000; Hill, 1997; McKinley, 1997; Manga, 2003; Tobin, 2000; Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995) tend to ignore the context and focus squarely on the audience response, without considering in a systematic fashion the text's role in generating it. For example, Gauntlett and Hill (1999) dismiss the rich and extended accounts that they found in their respondents' research diaries as 'anecdotally rich' but 'sociologically weak'. As they put it:

> The diaries were full of fascinating accounts of everyday life and built up to make moving stories of some individuals' struggles through difficult times and most of those lengthy individual stories do not appear in this book, which would have been more anecdotally rich but more sociologically weak if we filled up its pages with a selection of these 'nice stories'. (1999: 292–3)

It is to the enduring difficulties in meeting the challenge of bringing together the text, the context and the response in the same 'thick' analytical moment that Elizabeth Bird (2003) and Jenny Kitzinger (2004) have returned recently. Focusing on the relationship between text and response, Kitzinger (2004) questions the notion that media power is diminished by an audience's activity, arguing that it is only through the complexity of everyday practice that the media could have any effect at all. Similarly, Bird argues that meaning-making is never produced simply at the moment of reception. Rather, the audience is 'amorphous': it is 'everywhere and nowhere'. One never encounters the media as 'just' an audience; one is always something else, attending to a multiplicity of different practices, roles and identities (Bird, 2003: 2–3). As such, research must trace the ways in which individuals' processes of meaning-making function *across the practices* that make up everyday life. To do so, she argues, is to move 'beyond the audience' (Bird, 2003: 6).

In a different context, Brian Massumi (2002) argues that it is in such quotidian details that we face the possibility of 'writing singularity'. This is an epistemological move which acknowledges the general conditions which are necessary for an event to happen (the level of abstraction 'above' the flux of the everyday), but insists on an 'ever-present contingent excess', precisely that which remains hidden in the general case constructed through focus group discussions, letters and diaries:

> The singularity of the event is not in contradiction to its generality. The singularity is in necessarily contingent excess over the generality. It is an unfailing ingredient surplus, above and beyond the appearing object's possibility of being certified as a true case of its general category . . . The singular, contingent ingredients give it its uniqueness, its stubbornness in remaining perceptibly itself in addition to being a member of its class – its quality. The event retains a quality of 'this-ness', an unreproducible being-only-itself, that stands above its objective definition. (Massumi, 2002: 222)

The difficult point is to move away from the social scientific protocol of generalizing *across* cases, as we see in much audience research, and move towards the singular by generalizing *within* individual, extensive and intensively described micro-examples (Geertz, 1973; see Willis, 2000).

Singularity and audience research

While there are perhaps a number of ways of doing this, these issues can begin to be explored by drawing on the materials generated in a more extensive study conducted by myself (Briggs, 2005). The wider research is best described as an auto-ethnography insofar as I was interested in exploring the ways in which my partner, Sara, and I were addressed as parents on the birth of our first son, Isaac (Ellis, 2004). In particular, the research traces the ways in which we were addressed by a range of 'parenting discourses' (Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen, 2001) in the first 18 months of Isaac's life and the ways in which we introduced him to the preschool children's programme *Teletubbies*.[1] As such, I retain an interest in the text itself and how we made meanings with it in a particular setting, while connecting this to the development of our more general childcare practices. In short, when we sat down with Isaac to make meanings with *Teletubbies*, we were not engaged solely in the single media practice, but we were viewing also as parents – a very complex practice indeed.

The empirical materials presented here can be characterized in two ways. First, a number of texts and discourses are examined which were directly addressed to us as we learned to be parents, as well as the wider discursive ensemble which articulates these materials. In so doing the purpose is to think about the cultural regulation of practice by a wider discursive field, such as the BBC's promotional materials, toy advertising and parenting advice which addressed us as 'responsible parents' (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003; Chambers, 2001; Machin and Davies, 2003).

Second, this article draws on more recognizably ethnographic materials made up of a mixture of field notes, audiovisual materials and my own lived experience. Following the wider tradition of the auto-ethnographic method (e.g. Adler and Adler, 1998; Kelly-Byrne, 1989; Sefton-Green, 2004; Wolf and Heath, 1992), the field notes recorded not only Isaac's media practices, but also details of his wider play and family life and his rapid physical and social development between the ages of seven and 19 months. These field notes were made sometimes in the time-honoured fashion of just 'being around', scribbling things down on the nearest scrap of paper as soon as possible after they happened, or they were more systematic, recording speech and behaviour as Isaac watched with Sara (on occasions I would return from work and Sara would tell me things that she knew would be of interest to me). Note-taking in this sense is opportunistic rather than systematic; certainly it is interpretive (Goffman, 1989).

The audiovisual recordings were made as Sara and I watched *Teletubbies* with Isaac in our domestic context. Making home videos was a common practice in our household before this research began and in about half of the cases these recordings essentially take this form, being hand-held, overt and ostensibly a routine everyday practice. On other occasions, the camera was placed unobtrusively in the corner of the room. This had the benefit of capturing the television screen as well as our viewing practices. In addition to these specific materials, I also drew upon our home videos, many of which recorded Isaac reading, dancing, playing, using the computer and so on. As the visual ethnographer Sarah Pink (2001) has observed, often the identities of these materials are ambiguous, as they shift between family collections and research collections. In total 16 episodes (some eight hours of tape) were transcribed following Cochran-Smith (1984), in order to detail not only what was said and done *in front of* the text, but also its relationship to what was being simultaneously *represented in* the text. However, to exemplify, I turn to these materials, to the micro-example: to the 'this-ness' of our teletubby practice.

Being a 'responsible parent'

Isaac is 15 months old. He is playing with his mother, Sara, in our domestic living room. It is approaching 10am and Sara asks Isaac if he wants to watch *Teletubbies*. Looking puzzled, he runs over to the blank screen and touches it. Sara responds, 'Are they there yet? They aren't there yet are they?' As Isaac complains, Sara continues the conversation, 'What do you want, you want *Teletubbies* on?' Isaac treats the television physically, just as he treats all of his toys. It is an object to be manipulated and explored. He tries to switch it on. He touches the screen as Sara continues: 'Let me switch it on, you want *Teletubbies* on?'

Isaac stands right in front of the screen, having managed to switch it on by himself. He touches it and rubs his palms against the screen. After

a few moments, he runs across to give mummy an excited hug, now he knows that *Teletubbies* will be on. However, before it starts, a promotional trailer addresses Sara with some parental advice, with instructions on how to watch. The teletubbies are in the background, slightly indistinct, they say hello to each other in excited voices: 'Eh oh – Tinky Winky, Dipsy and Po.' A smiling toddler is superimposed; he is about the same age as Isaac, impossibly rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed. The image takes up much of the screen. Shot in slightly soft focus with very warm lighting, there seem to be connotations of care (this is how I read it): I feel myself addressed; they have a strong affective pull. The child turns to face Sara and Isaac in the living room. He is clearly reacting to the teletubbies in the background. With his affectionate and slightly shy grin, he appears to be sharing his joy, wonder and amazement with Sara. A female narrator (a model mother) speaks to Sara directly in a very warm, confident but loving voice which is well spoken and educated but not teacherly: no, it is more loving than that, it is maternal, the voice of a good parent ('an expert'), rich in cultural capital and willing to pass it on. She tells Sara that Isaac will soon be talking: 'It's about now that your child will say his [sic] first words.' As if to reiterate this, Tinky Winky and Po greet in their characteristic way, 'Eh Oh, Po, Eh Oh, Tinky Winky'. The toddler is gradually getting older and the mother invites Sara to imagine Isaac in 12 months' time: 'By now he will be learning up to 10 new words a day . . . So by now he [sic] will be able to tell you everything.'

In the background the teletubbies underscore the loving nature of this education into language: 'Big hug! Big hug!' The child looks affectionately towards his off-screen mother. She ruffles his hair in return (a gesture of love). The mother reinforces this message, if it is not clear enough already: '*Teletubbies* on CBeebies, the journey to school starts from home.'

Isaac, like the child in the trailer, is watching contently; he runs across to mummy who mirrors his enthusiasm, 'Whooo, look, *Teletubbies*, look!' The teletubbies greet each other and then Sara and Isaac ('Eh oh'). He climbs up to watch with her as she returns their gesture: 'Eh oh, Dipsy.'

Isaac is still fiddling with his book (*Peekaboo Baby*), but he also watches contently with Sara, who comments on the tummy tale ('What are they singing?'). She strokes his hair gently and affectionately: 'It's the post lady with all the letters.' She reads Isaac a page from his book and then again responds to the song in the tummy tale: 'It's the police, dancing police people, look!' She asks him to wave bye-bye as the song finishes, just as the telephone rings in the kitchen. While she talks the camera rolls on, Isaac 'reads' and plays with his book, paying only distracted attention to the television. He soon gets bored and runs off to find mummy. He runs in and out, still not interested as the teletubbies dance and hug. Sara returns and they sit together and watch contently as they were doing before; Isaac first on Sara's lap and then sitting beside her on the sofa. *Teletubbies*, it

seems, is no fun without her and it is clear that they are going to watch together with no more distractions.

There is an irony, a reversal of prevalent understandings of television, which characterize it as a passive babysitter (Seiter, 1995). While Isaac spent a great deal of time playing with us, he was increasingly happy to play alongside us; if we were present (just around) he would explore on his own, pulling this, chewing that, cruising here: 'how does this work?' These explorations were punctuated by periods of focused interaction: reading a book, building a tower, eating lunch, tickles, song and dance and *Teletubbies*. However, these practices are subject to complex forms of social regulation where what it means to play with your child, and how you let them watch television, is subject to a continual discursive scrutiny. Moreover, just what it means to be a parent is itself a discursive practice (Chambers, 2001). As such, I want to think about the wider interdiscursivity that contributes to the construction of our teletubby practice. It is in this context that the CBeebies discourse must be placed, for as Sara and myself sat down to watch *Teletubbies* with Isaac, our role, if we were to be responsible, was to begin his journey to school: we were to become 'parental pedagogues' (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003; Urwin, 1985).

Parenting discourses

Discourses such as we see here are by no means a new phenomenon. As Ellen Seiter's (1995) history suggests, television has been a source of a constant discursive scrutiny over the past 50 years. Originally, television was positioned as a source of family togetherness, 'a source of increased domestic harmony and intimacy in the dream home'. However, it has become the increasing subject of fears developed over its perceived role as a babysitter. 'Experts' have come to assign to mothers 'the job of censoring, monitoring and accompanying the child's viewing' (Seiter, 1995: 26).

Circulated in media of various kinds, this particular 'responsible viewing discourse' takes a number of forms which generally rely on the voice of the 'expert' – be it the chief inspector of schools, developmental psychologists, teachers, doctors or academics. They form an interdiscursive link presented, for example, either in the press, where typically negative and alarmist academic research papers are quoted, or in babycare books and 'mother and child magazines' (Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen, 2001: 159).

For example, a story circulated to coincide with the new school year is characteristic of the responsible viewing discourse. The *Daily Mail* led the way, giving two pages to an article in which David Bell, the head of Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education), the British government's school inspectorate, is reported to have 'spoken out' about the poor levels of socialization and language skills of children entering schools for the first time (Harris, 2003). Characteristically, television is linked quite explicitly to poor educational attainment and to a more general cultural decline.

Framed by the headline 'Couch Potato Kids Who Can't Even Talk to the Teacher', the article argues that television and its association with 'bad parenting' is the main culprit:

> [L]azy parents who use television as a babysitter have helped to create a generation of children whose speech and behaviour is at an all time low, the Government's education watchdog warned yesterday. (Harris, 2003: 8)

Citing this as symptomatic of 'poor family values' and a 'lack of discipline in the home', the familiar concern over the use of a television as an electronic babysitter is articulated:

> Mr Bell, a father of two daughters, accused parents of not doing enough to support teachers and said they could do more to develop their children's verbal skills before they start school. 'We should encourage parents to talk to their children and give them a whole range of stimulating things to do and not just assume that television, or whatever, will do that for them . . . Young children are speaking in "grunts". They communicate in monosyllables because mothers and fathers have lost the art of talking and playing with their children.' (Harris, 2003: 8)

The article goes on to suggest that some children have never sat at a table and cannot use a knife and fork 'because their parents let them eat their tea sitting on the floor in front of the television' (Harris, 2003: 8). The *Sun*, the *Daily Express* and the *Telegraph* ran very similar versions of the story; the *Sun* quoting Bell as saying that 'even busy middle class parents are leaving their toddlers in front of the TV all day, rather than playing, talking and reading to them' (Wooding, 2003: 10). The *Daily Star* picked up on the story two days later under the headline: 'The Five-Year-Olds Hooked on Telly: It's Turning Our Kids into Dunces':

> Kids as young as five are hooked on TV – and it's turning them into school flops . . . even more parents are using TV to keep their kids entertained [and have] failed to impose discipline at home and simply left children in front of the TV. (Leonard, 2003: 6)

However, while these points need to be recognized, this responsible viewing discourse argues that the biggest danger to be guarded against is that TV viewing is *passive* and above all else, *addictive*. This sits in tension with cultural discourses that understand childhood as a time of frenetic activity (Seiter, 1995). As such, passivity is constructed in the responsible viewing discourse as a pathological state and is situated directly against the activity involved in achieving developmental tasks (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003). As Seiter suggests, according to this responsible viewing discourse, if play is the work of childhood, then television deters children from achieving the 'normative agendas of child development' (1995: 33).

In this discourse of responsible viewing, *Teletubbies* is singled out explicitly as it is aimed at a particularly 'vulnerable' infant audience who are being 'weaned on the television' (Lowther, 2003: 6). Following the

vocabulary of dependency the *Daily Mail* suggests: 'Children Addicted to Television at Age of Two':

> Toddlers are becoming couch potatoes almost as soon as they leave the pram, psychologists have warned. Research shows that, on average, children under five are watching two hours of television a day – forming a habit which stays with them for many years. The phenomenon is being blamed on the emergence of programmes aimed at young infants, such as *Teletubbies* and parents who use the television as a substitute 'nanny' for their children. (Mills, 2001: 2)

This discourse constructs a version of the child audience where children watch passively in a mesmerized state for long periods of time. This is addictive: when on, the television demands total and slavish attention. It causes obesity, bad manners and poor educational attainment. It delays the activity of achieving developmental tasks. As such, the image of children produced is almost completely decontextualized from their wider practices and cultures, while the image of the parent is one of abuse and careless neglect (Buckingham, 1997). This is a very powerful discourse indeed. It informs a powerful 'commonsense' for everyday thinking about television (see Seiter, 1999).

As parents we were situated in relation to this powerful commonsense. This is emotionally charged (we wanted the best for Isaac) and learning how to be parents for the first time left us particularly vulnerable to this type of talk (see Urwin, 1985). While we might not have truly believed these claims, we were addressed by these general characterizations of television and our childcare practices developed in relation to them. It is clear to see in these terms that our teletubby practice was much more than a product of the CBeebies discourse alone; rather it was a product of a more general discourse of proper parenting. The CBeebies discourse was just one articulation of this field. As will be demonstrated, other discourses such as the importance of developmental play, early reading experiences, close contact and interaction, responsiveness and healthy diet also can be seen to feed into the construction of 'proper parenting'.

Habitus and singularity

These issues address questions of cultural reproduction through the regulation of parenthood (Chambers, 2001). However, as has been argued, this article would like to address issues of agency, for these discourses were articulated to a pre-existing set of dispositions and practices, which suggests that they did not enter into our lives in any simple and deterministic sense. As such, in order to think about the ways in which media effects are realized through practice, it draws on Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of habitus, for he argues that we hold a set of 'transposable dispositions' which make up, and are governed by, the habitus. This is a generative schema 'which can be applied, by simple transfer, to the most dissimilar areas of

practice' (Bourdieu, 1986: 175). Bourdieu argues that the dispositions of the habitus become naturalized and embodied, working below the level of consciousness as *le sense pratique*: an implicit and practical mastery that he compares to a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1990: 66).

While Bourdieu's position is very useful, it does tend to produce a rather too general picture, which it is quite at odds with the position here on singularity. For example, as various critical commentaries have argued, habitus tends to function like an unexaminable black box, which is both automatically structured and structuring (Barker and Brooks, 1998; Scollon, 2001). It is never quite specified in Bourdieu's accounts exactly how these dispositions develop or are employed in actual contexts. Rather, he traces the broad similarities *between groups* which occupy the same 'social space' (Noble and Watkins, 2003: 524), which tends to flatten out differences between broadly similar members of an 'objectively constructed' class fraction (Lahire, 2003: 332). In my terms, this produces a 'general case'.

This has consequences, for as Greg Noble and Megan Watkins (2003) argue, if more attention is paid to the generative aspect of habitus, we need to see how dispositions are learned: how we become habituated (Noble and Watkins, 2003). Similarly, Brian Lahire (2003) argues, in an approach such as mine, that there is a shift from the general logics of large numbers of agents to the specific practices of particular people in their ecologies of practice. This means looking for the dynamism of the dispositions, the manner in which they are held, to the contradictions between them, of their reversibility, to the fact that one might adopt different dispositions in distinct practices, while remaining tied to a more general habitual logic. Indeed, we would want to look for the contextual and interpersonal nature of the transferability and ask if it is as much a product of the ecology of practice as of the objectivities of social space (Lahire, 2003).

The principle I want to derive from this relates to singularity. I am not claiming that other people who share a similar position in social space will automatically construct the teletubby practice in the same way as Sara and I (i.e. that they will share the same set of dispositions by the generative logic of a shared habitus). Nor do I claim that all of our practices were structured automatically and rigidly by the same set of dispositions, these being much more contradictory and 'chooseable' than Bourdieu allows. I do not want to argue that this was entirely divisible across Sara and I, for while we have *come to share* a common set of dispositions, these may be held to different degrees, in different contexts. Moreover, we may hold dispositions also that are not shared at all, or which are structured by the gendered dynamics and power relations involved in the organization of parenting roles (Skeggs, 1997).

Given this, rather more modestly, the attention is focused here on a particular habitus – our childcare habitus. I want to account for the general logics that were similar to the way that we oriented to Isaac across specific childcare practices and how this was shared between us as a

regular and consistent practice (Scollon, 2001). While Sara and I hold a different (and gendered) configuration of dispositions, nevertheless these merge in the confluence of a long-term and committed relationship, especially when we were required to construct a specific habitus in order to undertake something as daunting and 'unknown' as being parents for the first time.[2]

To develop this argument, the next part of this article follows Noble and Watkins (2003) to think about the self-reflexive manner in which we adopted or cultivated our dispositions in this childcare habitus. It argues that while many aspects of the habitus can be considered unconscious, unthinking or as embodied (i.e. psychically and somatically inscribed, or more or less automatic), this can be overlaid or redirected by social and interpersonal discourse (i.e. calibrated). This can be seen in the ways in which we consciously recognized our address by discourse and also through the ways in which we monitor ourselves in actual practices (Noble and Watkins, 2003). Noble and Watkins refer to this as a process of 'agentic reflection': a 'discursive practice in which we consider our behaviour and its principles, which involves the monitoring of conduct which can be brought to discourse' (2003: 531).

Our childcare habitus: a ludic pedagogy

A range of parenting discourses addressed Sara and I as we learned to be parents for the first time and it is against these that how we watched *Teletubbies* developed. However, it was not conscious and explicit: only rarely did we sit down and weigh up the evidence. This is not how practices, families and identities are formed. Rather, these discourses and their claims shaped who we were over a lifetime and how we came to be parents. As Bourdieu argues, it was 'embodied history', an 'active presence of the whole past' (1990: 56). In part, they informed what we valued and who we were: literate with a high investment in education (a primary school teacher and a doctoral student and visiting lecturer in cultural studies), but child-centred, impassioned by the possibilities of play, fantasy and story. This was not just an issue with television; it was much more of a pervasive disposition across a whole range of childcare practices. We bought Isaac his first high-contrast books at three months, as we were keen to develop his literacy as a love of books while also providing him with a stimulating and active environment. As soon as he was born we bought him high contrast shapes and patterns to look at in the car – like the books, these were marketed as being 'cognitively stimulating'.

This was also the case with Isaac's baby gym. We agonized over which one to buy him and eventually settled on the *Tiny Love* 'Lights and Music 3D Activity Gym'. We were won over by the fact that it played Mozart. The active and playful disposition was clearly addressed to us in the promotional literature for the gym. For example, just calling this

a gym (really a play mat) in itself articulates discourses of fitness, both physical and mental – perhaps also of our fitness (that is, our suitability) as parents. The choice demonstrated our investment in his development, as it addresses us in terms of a number of skills, differentiated across distinct stages: the development of his 'senses', 'motor skills', 'emotional intelligence', 'imagination and creativity', 'perceptual and cognitive skills' and 'problem-solving ability'.

Food was the same – organic vegetables and homemade meals. Having read the popular advice books (e.g. Karmel, 2001) we were determined to develop his taste for good food and to give him strong flavours and healthy options. Isaac was never fed processed food; the only jars we bought from the supermarket were organic fruit purées. The bright colours of our homemade meals ('watercress, potatoes and courgette puree', 'lovely lentils', 'Popeye pasta') were designed to appeal to all his senses in order to develop them; eating was to be lively, active, imaginative, not bland and processed, ordinary and dull. We thought of ourselves as educating his palate and informing his culinary future: not only feeding his body, but also his mind. Quite literally, this was a matter of taste, which positioned Sara and I as much as Isaac. Our cultural capital was on full display.

The playful disposition informed most of our parenting practices in one way or another. Most of Isaac's clothes were what have been referred to as 'toyalised' objects (Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen, 2001: 171). Teddy-bear hoods, *Bob the Builder* T-shirts, babygros decorated with animals and trains, a Christmas pudding hat (complete with a sprig of toy holly) for his first Christmas and a singing 'Rudolf' bib. Similarly, when we came to decorate his room it was themed with bright colours (sunshine yellow paintwork and a harlequin rug). The walls were toyalized with a set of *Thomas the Tank Engine* transfers. However, this was not his primary play space, for most of his toys were kept downstairs in the living room: just as it was filled with our things, the things we valued, so it was filled with his things, his toys. These were not tidied away upstairs, they were the playful paraphernalia of everyday life, the essentials to a ludic disposition in which 'to play is to learn'.

The television was really another toy, something which, despite its size, could be handled and manipulated, turned on, channels changed, looked into like a mirror, kissed and touched; although we had due regard for his safety it was never a fetishistic object (of pride and desire) to be looked at from afar. This tactile affordance was similar to his play with books. Isaac's favourite at one time, *Thomas Songs*, plays a nursery rhyme on each page, inviting us to sing along as we press the buttons together. He was unequivocal about the books that he wanted to read, purposefully presenting them to us: he knew we would rarely say no to a story.

Not knowing if we were 'doing it right', we felt directly addressed by the ubiquitous advertising for childcare products. Like Seiter (1995) and the mothers Urwin (1985) talked to, we now noticed this everywhere.

As first-time parents, we avidly read the advice literature both in the form of magazines and books. This worked in a powerful affective context shaped by our own identities, our projections of the future and the intense and gendered feelings that surround parenthood. Much of this advertising, literature and advice tapped into this context, promising to redouble the emotional rewards and satisfaction of bringing up your children through the goods and practices that they promote while at the same time stressing the need to give your child the best start in life, prepare them for school, nurture and attend to their development at every moment. It was this, then, in part which told us how to watch *Teletubbies*, how to be responsible parents and how to foster Isaac's healthy development through play. These discourses, which constitute a 'ludic pedagogy', informed our childcare habitus.

Watch with mother

However, this childcare habitus must be seen in relation to a number of institutional factors which form another part of the discursive field. For example, Buckingham (2002), Davies (2001) and Oswell (2002) note that there is a long tradition of child-centred educational television at the BBC and *Teletubbies* is positioned as part of this tradition. As Máire Messenger Davies suggests, this tradition or 'ethos' aims to produce television for children that stimulates learning, social skills and the development of imaginative thinking. As such, children's television is constructed by broadcasting discourse to 'help children in the task of growing up' (Davies, 2001: 58). This, in turn, is central to the BBC as the definer of the public service system and the provenance of these discourses have been traced to the requirements of the BBC to legitimate its public funding in an increasingly market-driven environment. As Buckingham argues, in this respect, children's television is seen as a 'test case' of the future of public service broadcasting (Buckingham, 2002; Machin and Davies, 2003).

These discourses are articulated across a range of textual sites. For example, a free 'parents' guide' was distributed with the July 2003 issue of the parenting magazine *Mother and Baby*, with the September 2003 issue of the BBC's *Teletubbies* magazine, as well as with the *Meet the Teletubbies* video/DVD. It is also available free from the production company's website (Ragdoll: www.ragdoll.co.uk). It was advertised in the August 2003 edition of *Mother and Baby* under the headline: 'Do You Speak Teletubby?' This clearly places an emphasis on language development, albeit through play. Presented as 'Tips for Watching *Teletubbies* with Your Tinies and Toddlers', the guide in effect instructs parents on how to view, addressing them as parental pedagogues and responsible parents:

> Watching *Teletubbies* with your child should be a shared experience, like reading a book together. Prepare for it – make it an event.

Talk about it, don't view in silence; encourage their comments.

Encourage your child to interact with the screen – waving, clapping along, join in with rhymes, songs, catchphrases.

Revisit these rhymes and catchphrases at other times during your child's play.

Notice when a very young child's short attention span is diverted.

Encourage your child to guess what will happen next; celebrate their success.

Make connections between the text and their world – delight in it when your child makes these connections.

But most of all ENJOY the shared time together!

This is in effect a parenting discourse, which has as its target not only the legitimization of preschool television but also the practice of proper parenting and healthy child development. Parents are positioned to watch along with the child so that they might supervise and encourage active and intelligent responses and become 'parental pedagogues' (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003: 75; Oswell, 2002). This also creates certain meanings for the channel, particularly through other promotional trailers, advertising and general merchandising (Lury, 2002). As we have seen in the examples previously given, CBeebies positions itself as explicitly educational, the brand identity built around the phrase 'learning through play'. It acts as guarantee of quality: as responsible parents, you can trust the BBC.

Given this address and our wider childcare habitus, there was little we could do but ensure Isaac's active engagement: it had to be educational, *he had to learn through this play*. At the time of writing, Isaac is three years old, and when he watches television I feel a sense of guilt that this is wasted time, that he should be doing something better. This general need for active viewing, of investing in his development, is pervasive. In this respect, the way in which we watched had an explicitly pedagogic inflection: this was one way of orientating to the text.

A textual pedagogy

The final part of the discussion argues that these parenting discourses find their manifestation in the way that we drew the text into semiosis. It draws on the audiovisual materials produced as Sara and I watched *Teletubbies* with Isaac in order to argue that one of the interpretive strategies that characterized our practice can be thought of as the *pedagogic orientation*. By orienting to the text in this way, Sara and I were fulfilling the role constructed by the *implied position*. This position can be though of as an ideal role constructed by the text, from which it makes most sense (Cochran Smith, 1984). It argues that the way in which Sara and I assumed this implied role is seen most clearly in our talk (see Lemish and Rice, 1986).

These utterances were most generally quite explicit instructions on how to watch and what to look at. However, following Bakhtin (1981), it argues that this was essentially dialogic, for our ways of speaking always involve borrowing from a heterogeneity of prior voices. We 'rented' our voice from the text, by adopting the calm and patient voice of the 'ideal parents' that the diegetic narrators represent. It became our own as we did so. We populated it with our own 'semantic and expressive intentions', with our own accents (Bakhtin, 1981: 293). As we will recall, the BBC discourse implored: 'The journey to school starts from home.'

The lesson

Isaac is 18 months old, and impossibly curious about his world; we are seeing the beginning of his move into adult language. We are colouring in during a slow and uninteresting dance routine in *Teletubbies*. However, as the tummy tale begins, I direct Isaac's attention to the television by repeating the tale's motif: 'Come and see, what are they going to do, where are they going?'

The text resembles a lesson from school; a chorus of children sing 'Seven Green Bottles' to a steady rhythm. This voice counts (the beat is numerical). It encourages us to count (one, two, three, four, five, six, seven). A milkman appears and delivers seven pints of milk; I narrate, I teach (this is an opportunity to learn): 'That's a milk float, you don't see many of those. Seven pints! Seven pints of milk!' The music maintains its arithmetical rhythm as the children shout out (in reply to the tutor voice of the narrator): 'Seven.'

As Isaac watches, I count out on my fingers, 'It's one, two, three and four, five, six, seven . . . seven children.' The children again: 'Seven.' I am implicated in the dialogue: 'seven'. We cut to a shot of a woman walking her dogs. The screen is now used like a page (a talking picture book): to be touched. It is multimodal and tactile, not just the object of the curious gaze. I lean over, asking: 'How many dogs?' I touch them as I do, counting once again ('One, two, three, four, five, six, seven'). We enact the dialogue as the children call out 'seven'. 'Seven . . . that's a lot of dogs, isn't it!' comes my reply. And so we go on: 'seven diggers' (I count them on the screen again), 'seven apples', 'seven children' ('one, two, three, four, five, six, seven').

The second time round (the tale is always repeated) I follow Isaac's lead, this time the lesson is designation: the women appears again with the dogs and Isaac shouts out excitedly, gesturing at the screen: 'De De!' 'It's a dog,' I reply as he looks at me: 'It's a dog, it goes woof and a digger.' Isaac walks over to the toy unit and pulls down a large cuddly dog. He holds it up to the television screen ('Look, daddy: it's the same,' he seems to say, 'they're saying hello.'). I respond with affection: 'Ahh, is that Hector? Yeah, he's a dog isn't he! You showing him to the dogs? Woof!' Running over to me, Isaac shouts out: 'It's a dog!' As we cuddle (all three)

I laugh and reinforce his vocalization, 'You said it's a dog, didn't you!' (I am pleased as these are among his first adult words). He runs back over to the television, flapping his arms in excitement as I continue the lesson: 'Yeah, it's a dog, Ahh! Ahh! Ahh! Seven apples, yeah.' The children shout out again 'seven', prompting my reply 'seven'. Then it's back to Hector: 'woof, woof, woof'. Still in the pedagogic orientation, Isaac gives me a small wooden flower, I hold it up to the screen: 'It's a flower,' I say, comparing it with those in Teletubbyland (the two are superimposed). Just prior to this, *Smarteenies* had breached the boundary similarly by finger-painting bees and flowers on the inside of the screen (Isaac told me this was naughty, he knows you only draw on paper). A little later he explores this boundary himself, holding the flower to the screen as I had done: how does the world work?

This theme continues in the second half of the episode, implying us further as Tinky Winky, Dipsy, La La and Po take turns counting to seven. I pick up the stacking cups we have been playing with (drawing 'what is to hand' into semiosis) and build a tower: 'One, two, three, four, five, six, hurray, seven!' This is intercut with Po's counting: 'Po's counting to seven too, she's the littlest, yeah.' Then on to colour and size: 'You going to get the green one? You going to get the purple one? Where's the small one gone?' As I take Isaac up to the bed, the camera keeps on filming: the familiar promotional entreaty 'to release your child's potential' addresses the viewer, the ideal parent of the pedagogic voice is implied: 'CBeebies: helping little ones discover big things.'

The voice I used here is the voice of questions. There is a constant interplay between the voice of the primary narrator (an ideal parent, a pedagogue, in the text) and myself as I act as a secondary narrator. This forms a dialogue with the textual narrator who represents an ideal parent who is always there, benevolent, asking the right questions at the right time, knowing 'just when' to intervene. This can be thought of as a form of what Jerome Bruner (1975) calls 'scaffolding', for I seem to be offering Isaac the chance to view as an older child, or rather, I ask on his behalf the sort of questions I think that older children do and make a similar set of comments and exclamations. I am attentive to what he might find interesting, what is 'educational' or 'developmentally stimulating' and what might connect to his wider play life, his developing abilities and ongoing interests. As such, what we see here, once a singular conception of analysis is adopted, is the distinct ways in which media effects are produced *through* practice (Bird, 2003; Kitzinger, 2004). We were not positioned simply by parenting discourses. We did not mechanically adopt these subject positions, as critics such as Oswell tend to imply (Briggs, 2004; Oswell, 2002). Rather, these discourses were refracted through an accumulated history, across a range of practices. They seemed to make sense to us and we saw value in this way of watching. It easily articulated to our childcare habitus.

Conclusion: from the audience to the nexus of practice

Teletubbies as a textual form raises the issue of practice in stark relief, for it is not a text to be interpreted in any simple way. Positioned in a powerful field of interdiscursivity, the text solicits an active response: it is there to be joined in with; it is to be played along with ('this way your child will learn'). This has been argued, for while this article has been attentive to the relationship between the text and audience response, it has broadened this out in a complex movement towards a wider nexus of practice. On the one hand, it has suggested that the text itself is *in part* constitutive of a wider set of practices that make up and govern our childcare habitus. By assuming the textually implied position, Sara and I were habituating ourselves to culturally legitimated and valued childcare practices: we were being responsible, fostering his play and imagination and investing in his education. On the other hand, this relationship is dialectical, for we recognized and willingly occupied this discursively and textually implied position: it readily articulated to our pre-existing (pre-child) dispositions and the practices that they regulated. This article has explored the way in which the concept of a childcare habitus, once it is approached through the perspective of singularity, offers a productive way of tracing the ways in which a wider discursive field articulates to, and shapes, practice.

While, as an auto-ethnography, the research presented here can be identified as an audience study, it is working with a very particular conception of 'audience'. By focusing on the intensely described micro-example, it has suggested an alternative to the 'general case' that is produced in audience research, where an account is pieced together almost always over a number of different respondents' talk. While this has benefits in terms of each individual project (insofar as it explores a heterogeneity of responses), it also tends to reify 'the audience'. Here, research tends to enquire into what people do when they are a part of an audience. While of course this is necessary and desirable, we also need to be aware that it does tend to single out 'watching' (film, television and so on) as a single practice rather than seeing it as part of a thickly embedded nexus of practice. Seen in this way, the project of writing singularity is designed to emphasize the distinction between single practice, which is to think about being a 'member of an audience' in the plural sense of the term, and exploring the singular example, which is to explore the embedding of this singular practice in an irreducible nexus of practice. Crucially, the media text and also the interdiscursive context, is an element of this nexus (Scollon, 2001). The issue is one of charting the ways in which they knot together, and the ways in which media effects assume their power through the complexities of practice rather than in the moment of interpretation, decoding or textual address alone (Bird, 2003; Couldry, 2004; Kitzinger, 2004).

Doubtless there are many ways to do this, but a model of practice (long since outlined by those such as Lindlof and Traudt, 1983; Moores, 1990; Morley, 1989; Silverstone, 1994) seems to be one important way of exploring the complexities of the relationships between 'texts', 'contexts' and 'audiences' and the ways in which the media's role in the ordering of social life is organized through practice. Indeed, Richard Johnson's (1983) model of a 'circuit of culture' is germane in this respect: to move *between* public representations (the abstract and the universal) to the concrete and the particular; to situate textual forms in the lived cultures and social relations of the everyday. To do so is to specify the conditions of reception, reading and meaning-making which are manifestly concrete, which concretize the other moments – of the mass circulation and production of texts, discourses and representations. This article has refused to separate the moments of 'text', 'context' and 'reading' as each relies upon each other. Accordingly, it has produced an ethnography which is built *around* the text, which traces a nexus of practice which refuses such neat distinctions. To think in these terms, as it has argued, it to think *beyond the audience*.

Notes

1. More precisely, the empirical materials were generated between June 2002 and January 2004.
2. This does raise some difficult questions about gendered parenting and the dynamics and power relations involved in the allocation of roles and the negotiation of the childcare habitus. It is certainly a limitation of the present study that these aspects are not considered, the materials which might suggest the long and protracted process of negotiation, agreeing and conflict not being generated in the auto-ethnographic study. However, this certainly suggests an agenda for further research, which would want to chart the decisions to have children, the feelings involved in attempts to conceive, the preparations involved in the pregnancy itself, as well as the formation of particular practices on the birth of the child.

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