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Editorial introduction

When Tom O'Regan asked me to edit a volume of **Continuum** on 'media discourse', I didn't know what I was in for. Not only didn't I realise the labour involved (from the enforced obsequiousness of soliciting on three continents, to the tedium of changing Harvard references to MLA, to the anxieties of unreturned proofs, to the interface between ten different wordprocessors and a desktop publishing program in three different computer systems ...); not only that, I was unsure what direction to take - as it were, 'intellectually'. I never professed to have any expertise in media. The nearest I ever got was when Griffith University asked me (as a job candidate) to submit a course outline for a Part-time BA course on film, even though the post I'd applied for was in sociology! When I want to know about media, I usually rely on picking the brains of Tom himself, David Wills, Josko Petkovic or John Hartley.

So with these (dis) qualifications for the task, my main goal was to try to move away from the tried and trusted ways of media text analysis - away from psychoanalysis, 'Birmingham' cultural studies, ideology-critique, aesthetics, segmentalism and so on - and towards a more sociological, linguistic and textualist/discursive frame of reference. I wanted familiar ground - and it probably shows.

For the most part, I decided to approach analysts with linguistic, sociological and socio-linguistic trainings who have interests in the analysis of a wide range of text genres - in media texts, to be sure, but not only in media texts. I also wanted to see how recent developments in discourse analysis and discourse theory would fare when applied to (or brought into conjunction with) media texts. [\[note 1\]](#) In particular, I had the following three directions in mind and hoped they would overlap to a degree:

(a) movements in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis away from analysing only transcripts of naturally occurring conversations and towards broader conceptualisations of writing and speech (fiction, TV, documentary, institutional exchanges of talk and text, and so on), [\[note 2\]](#)

(b) developments in and around the forms of critical linguistics which have been emerging for some time out of the background of Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics and which seem to have given rise to what Norman Fairclough has called 'The Australian School', [\[note 3\]](#)

(c) the attention to discourse (as both writing and speech, among other things) which is currently labelled 'post-structuralism' - though this title, like many others ('deconstruction', 'grammatology', etc.) is bound to mislead. I have in mind what was called, in the **New York Times** last year, that "Paris-inspired Nietzsche-influenced school of thought that claims that there is no objective knowledge but

simply interpretations and rhetorical persuasions ... hermeneutics, deconstructionism, radical feminism and other trendy isms" - though the ineffective cruelty and inaccuracy of this characterisation would hardly be worth repeating were it not so obviously over-the-top, amusing in its own vulgar conservative way, and one of the few openly published versions of the sorts of ignorance one can hear at any tick of the clock in the tearooms of certain English Departments. [\[note 4\]](#)

As to the question of which types of media text should be considered, I left this to the contributors. In fact I was so unsure about the term 'media' that I gave them carte blanche - trusting that their expertise would make up for my deficiencies. As it turned out, however, a fairly nice grouping began to emerge. So in the end, it was almost true to say that each of the above three analytic orientations (post-ethnomethodology, critical linguistics and the-other-one-which-no-one-likes-to-name) made a contribution to four reasonably distinct areas of media studies:

(1) visual media: particularly film and its dialogue (Silverman) and photography and its adjacent fields (McHoul), but including their relation to film criticism and analysis (Lucy);

(2) documentary: considered theoretically in terms of its relation to the vexed questions of 'truth' and 'representation' (Routt); as a film genre with distinctive forms of conjunctive structure (van Leeuwen); and in terms of a particular documentary film's discursive construction 'on the set' (Baker);

(3) news and journalism: brought together in terms of 'the new journalism' which may not be so new as we think (Lucy); as broadcast news which can be analysed for its quite specific combinations of linguistic structures (Higgins); and as a particular newspaper text whose intelligibility is highly susceptible to ethnomethodological analysis (Jayyusi);

(4) advertising and consumption: with a specific focus on the feminine body and the discursive construction of its apparent 'need' for a corset in the 1920s (Best); and on the emergence of the early consumer's 'fight back' in the form of consumers' unions and their investigative magazines a decade later (Grahame).

This final arrangement wasn't planned: it merely fell out this way and so, naturally, there are some gaps in an otherwise tightish matrix. In particular, there are no analyses of either visual texts or of advertising from the post-Hallidayan perspective. But it's also true to say that a contribution of the latter kind would only have added to the considerable body of such work already in print. I wanted, by contrast, to venture into slightly newer territory. And on the visual score, a recent book which uses critical linguistics to analyse visual texts has only recently appeared and it would be very hard to compete with such a thorough-going work in the space of a single paper. [\[note 5\]](#) Indeed, the idea of a 'social semiotics of the media' would seem to require a volume in its own right.

What is included here is not entirely new(s), however: work of this kind can be found elsewhere, but usually outside the mainstream of media analysis, and usually in a set of

disciplinary domains (linguistics and sociology in particular, but also literary studies) where one occasionally happens upon a more 'left field' analysis which may turn, say, from mundane conversation to film dialogue; or from 'made up' clauses and sentences to the social-textual effects of actual news broadcasts; or from novels and poems to video clips. The people who do this kind of work often do so with a considerable degree of risk: in terms the problems it can lead to both within their 'home' disciplines and within what has come to pass for media studies.

Mentioning just one example: to equate talk on TV with 'actual' talk is still problematic for some conversation analysts (though their proportion is dwindling) who hold to a strong division between 'naturally occurring' speech and 'mock-ups'. To be sure, this has to it a ring of what J.L. Austin called the 'etiolations' of language (language used on the stage or TV for example - 'Kylie didn't really marry Jason') as opposed to genuine and socially binding performatives - a division which Derrida put paid to quite some time ago in his debate with Searle. But it is still a division which tends to send graduate students in conversation analysis out with their tape recorders when the air-waves are full of the very phenomena they want. (And I have to admit that I'm still persuaded by Wes Sharrock's argument, which he put to me last year in Manchester, to the effect that to call a conversation, a city or a film 'a text' is to take an unwarranted metaphorical step, to move outside the frame of analysis-proper.) But by the same token, many media specialists will find conversation-analytic approaches to, say, film dialogue, 'naive' in terms of their own criteria of relevance. Film is supposed to be, above all, visual. The sound-track is supposed to be merely a 'support': whether one is a traditional film-fan or one of the newer breed of anti-logocents. How could an attention to dialogue cover the complex historical, intertextual, industrial, technical and artistic matters which unfold 'behind' the surface of the sound-track? [\[note 6\]](#)

The work in this issue of **Continuum** challenges many of these ingrained assumptions - and their equivalents in linguistics and literary studies. But since **Continuum** is directed mainly at media-watchers, -readers, -analysts and -fans, I hope the analytic, theoretical and reflective work in this volume will be received as a small token of the genuine interest paid to media outside media studies - as a gesture towards a renewal of what was once called 'interdisciplinarity'.

My thanks go to the contributors for their prompt responses and patience in the face of my rude reminders; to Tom O'Regan for editorial and computing advice; and to Susan Hayes for proof-reading, food and love.

Notes

1. What I mean by discourse analysis and theory would take some considerable space to explain. See my paper 'Discourse' in **The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics** (New York/Aberdeen: Pergamon Press/University of Aberdeen Press, forthcoming 1991). For a particularly Australian inflexion of recent work in the field see **Journal of Pragmatics** v.13, n.3 (1989) - a Special Issue on Australian Contributions to Discourse Analysis.
2. A useful collection of papers in conversation analysis (CA) is J. Maxwell Atkinson & John

Heritage, **Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). As far as I know there is unfortunately no collection on critical ethnomethodology and CA. A useful monograph is Dorothy Smith, **The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

3. This was during his opening address at the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) conference, Lancaster University, 13th September 1989. For an introduction to critical linguistics, see Norman Fairclough, **Language and Power** (London: Longman, 1989).

4. This would have to include work as diverse as that of Foucault and the Foucauldians and Derrida and the Derrideans - and it could not fail to involve brushes with some feminisms, Lacanian psychoanalysis and the Deleuze brigade. May I be forgiven for the conflation which shorthand brings - and have it known that I'd prefer to be splitting rather than lumping (to borrow Bob Hodge's happy distinction). The first two chapters of Brunette and Wills's **Screen/Play** (analysed by Niall Lucy in the present volume) give a sound and uncompromising introduction to Derrida's philosophy and analytic method. A useful short introduction to Foucault's conception of discourse (and its connections with systemic functionalism) can be found in John Frow, **Marxism and Literary History** (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.51-82. And: Thanks to David Wills for showing me the clipping from the **New York Times**.

5. Bob Hodge & Gunther Kress, **Social Semiotics** (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

6. In more relaxed and speculative moments, I like to wonder whether this contretemps between various advocacies (mundane conversation vs media texts, for example) has any connection with broader 'structures of feeling' (as Raymond Williams used to call them). Sometimes I wonder - though I could never theorise the connection - whether it has to do with the belief that conversation has killed the art of television.
