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Meaning, Play & Experience: Audience Activity and the 'Ontological Bias' in Children's Media Research

Abstract

Research into young child audiences has emphasised the active nature of meaning making, notably in terms of the developing modal criteria that children employ to distinguish between 'television fantasy' and 'everyday reality'. This paper draws on ethnographic materials generated with an infant, in order to explore types of response which are not recognised in this literature. While significant, it is argued that accounts of modal judgements do not give a complete account of the types of experiential meaning which are produced in the process of meaning making: a specific experiential 'modality of response'. The ethnographic materials suggest that the everyday practices through which the text was 'drawn into semiosis' served to blur the two ontological realms, and that this was encouraged by the text's (*Teletubbies*) mode of address; this constitutes a form of 'parasocial interaction'. The paper contextualises this semiosis in terms of the family's play and parenting practices, and seeks to extend the concept of 'modality of response' suggesting some of the methodological issues that it raises.

Key words: Audience activity, experience, infants, modality judgements, modality of response, play, *Teletubbies*

Two tales of the everyday

My son Isaac is in his second year. He is fond of the noisy monkeys at his local zoo. Safe as they are in their cages they fascinate him. One day, having just returned from his weekly visit, *Teletubbies* showed some monkeys coming right up to the inside of the

screen, as if they were going to climb out. Unsure about this, Isaac ran to his mother for support: hugging her leg, he had to be reassured of the separateness of the two worlds: there were no safe bars here. As developmental psychologists have argued, this blurring seems to be driven by experience and affect, rather than by conceptualisation and confused modal distinctions (e.g. Harris et al 1991; Harris 2000). Quite simply, Isaac could not yet think in a conceptual manner. To ask if he was confusing 'fantasy' and 'reality' seems a misnomer rather than a cause for excessive concern: in this case ontology is *experienced* as much as it is thought.

My second tale: a few days later Isaac picks up his Pooh Bear and cuddled him; he was watching my partner and myself shared a moment of affection. Through doing so he seemed to be saying: 'if you're having a nice cuddle, so will I; ah look, it is nice, I like cuddles too!' We encourage this by talking to and animating toys, attributing them with feelings, as *if* we loved them, as *if* they loved us, as *if* they had feelings. It's not unusual for Isaac to kiss teddy bears in books, he will kiss anything with a familiar face, be it *Wibbly Pig Can Dance*, *That's not my Teddy*, or any one of his favourite 'lift-the-flap' books (most of these have a mirror under the last flap: 'who's that? Ahhhh!!! – kiss!!!'). The Teletubbies are no different in this regard: he kisses them as they appear on the screen and the glass is smudged by his handprints as he tries to touch them. It can't just be the materiality of the objects, as we would expect with the real material 'thing in itself' (no soft fabric here only cold cardboard and shiny glass). Rather, this seems to be motivated by emotion and affect: *by experience*. In this respect, the boundaries between 'his world' and the 'diegetic space' are negotiable and porous. This is the structure of symbolic play: a ludic space, a space of interanimation where boundaries are experienced rather than thought. The distinctions between the two are not complete or secure. It is not another realm as classic play theory argues (Huizinga 1970; Caillois 1961). In this sense *reality is played* (Ehrmann 1971: 56).

Here we have two micro-ethnographic examples which render something of semiosis as it is generated in a complex nexus of practice (Scollon 2001). In these examples the audience is resolutely 'active'. My aim here is to explore the issues they raise for accounts of preschool children as an audience, and to examine the issue of 'audience activity' in more detail. This is organised in relation to two concerns: the first with the

practices through which television is made meaningful as an activity; the second with the limits of the cognitive or conceptual accounts of such activity, in which children are assumed to keep textual worlds and everyday worlds *separate*: 'to distinguish what was "fantasy" from what was "real"' (Messenger-Davies & Machin 2000: 37). My argument will be that by bringing these two agendas together a third more productive research agenda presents itself: one which is concerned with television and audience activity as *meaning*, as *play* and as *experience*.

Audience activity

Media scholarship with the very youngest audiences, both qualitative (e.g. Sefton-Green 2004; Götz 1999; Lealand 1998; Richards 1993, 1995; Buckingham 1993, 1996; Palmer 1986) and quantitative (e.g. Fisch & Truglio 2001; Ungerer et al 1998; Rideout et al 2001) has begun to explore the ways in which children are active in their meaning making with television: engaged in physical activities around the set, answering back, joining in and importing the themes, structures and characters of television into their everyday play. Likewise, psychologically informed research with educational programming such as *Teletubbies*, *Sesame Street* and *Blue's Clues* has suggested the active nature of the cognitive processes engaged by television: the image of the 'couch potato' gazing passively at the screen, physically and cognitively inert, has been called into question with these programmes (e.g. Howard & Roberts 2002; Wright et al 2001; Lemish & Tidhar 2001; Anderson et al 2000; Lemish 1987; Jaglom & Gardner 1981). For instance, Dafna Lemish and Mabel Rice long ago moved media research into the home to witness the complexity of audience activity with such programmes, suggesting that very young children use television as a 'talking picture book' (1986: 269).

In addition to these audience practices, a third strand of research stresses audience activity in relation an assumed deficiency: the inability of young children to tell the difference between, *and keep separate*, the different ontological realms of 'everyday reality' and 'television fantasy'. This tradition of research has been concerned with what might be called the 'pathologising potential' of the media. Questions are centred very much on public (and common sense) fears that children cannot distinguish between their

everyday worlds and the textual worlds presented to them (Howard 1996: 25). The more children can make the distinction *between* fantasy and reality, so the public discourse goes, the more they will have the ability to either 'cope with' or 'defend themselves' against the influence of media culture (Buckingham 1997: 40).

Accordingly, much work in this third agenda has *critically addressed* these issues by thinking seriously about the ways in which children negotiate these complex issues of 'reality' and 'fantasy'. Typical here is the work of Máire Messenger-Davies (1997), Chava Tidhar & Dafna Lemish (2003); Maya Gotz et al (2005) and Aimee Dorr (1983), who share David Hodge and Robert Tripp's (1986) distinction between 'internal' and 'external' modal criteria (knowledge of textual conventions and everyday experience of reality respectively). In particular this tradition argues that modality is not a fixed property of the text, but that rather 'the modality of a statement is not its actual relation to reality, its truth, falsity or whatever: it is a product of the judgement about the relationship the speaker makes' (Hodge and Tripp 1986: 106). Drawing upon cues that are a product of both the text and context, these judgements become less about strictly delineating fact from fiction, fantasy and reality, but rather more a question of the *relationship* between the two (Hodge & Tripp 1986: 103-4). This is significant, for as research in this area has suggested, these abilities develop over time, and children of different ages will make these modal judgements in different ways and combinations, mixing and conflating internal and external criteria.

This emphasis on children's modality judgements is very useful, and certainly problematises some prevalent assumptions about media effects, which linger perhaps in a strand of American Communications Research (e.g. Kotler et al 2001; Messaris & Sarret 1981; Tidhar & Levinsohn 1997). These studies, for example, also recognise the need to situate television viewing in the context of young children's domestic lives, paying particular attention to the mediation of the text by parents or other family members who organise the viewing situation. However, the emphasis is either on protecting children against the 'negative effects' of television, such as reducing the 'potentially harmful effects of watching TV violence and other negative portrayals' or in improving children's 'prosocial attitudes and behaviours' (Buerkel-Routhfuss & Buerkel 2001: 368-70). In such cases the influence of family mediation is often conceptualised as a 'variable' in television effects, which aids the child in cognitive processing of various kinds (Austin 1993: 148).

Other ethnographic work however has begun to explore how modal distinctions develop:

not only through children's growing conceptual ability and media literacy, but also through their everyday play practices and experiences in the home. For example, Cindy Dell-Clark (1995) Henry Jenkins (1988), Maya Götz (2005), Chris Richards (1993, 1995), Shelby Wolf and Shirley Brice Heath (1992) and Peggy Miller and her colleagues (2000) account for 'watching television' and 'reading' as a particular realm of experience or 'play frame'. Children and parents are seen here actively incorporating television themes and characters into their play, dressing up as them, drawing them, adopting them into their stories and fantasies and generally forming strong character relationships with them.

As I detail below, this insertion of television into a wider nexus of practices often seems to deliberately blur and undermine clear modal distinctions and intentionally seek to confuse the two registers of experience. This I argue has significant implications for the way in which we think about meaning making for modal questions which address children's *conceptual ability* to distinguish the two will also have exist alongside an agenda which asks about the *types of meanings* which are generated when children's viewing practices deliberately blur the two registers. This is a question of thinking about the ways that toddlers and preschool children are socialised into *culturally recognised and appropriate forms of engagement and response*, and the *types of meaning which are so generated*. As Martin Barker & Kate Brooks argue, ways of making meaning have to be taught, both by the text, and by various aspects of the reception contexts (Barker & Brooks 1998: 133-8; c.f. Haight & Miller 1993). These meanings should be seen as operating in different 'modalities of response' (1998: 285-9).

Modalities of response

I want to develop this point now, for like Hodge and Tripp's model of modality, Barker & Brook's concept doesn't assume a singular relationship between fantasy and reality, but seeks to explore the 'multiple kinds of imagining' audiences are engaged in, and the relationship this holds to ongoing aspects of their lives. This is particularly constructive in stressing the different subjective orientations we have to the world, and the modal status *of our responses* (of both thought and practice). For example, imagining, pretending, fantasising, dreaming, believing, hoping, anticipating, wishing, pondering, empathising, thinking through, reflection upon, and debating (for instance), all combine

practical cognition, imaginative thinking, emotional and affective responses in different ways, and therefore have a different 'modal fit' with the world. Their essential and important point is that we need to be aware that our engagements with media texts produce *responses* with similarly distinct *modal statuses* and that these are organised through the practical activity and 'logics in use' through which our media consumption is organised (1998: 285-289). To do so reorients the research agenda: from looking at how audiences *evaluate texts in order to make meanings with them, to the sort of meanings which are produced as they engage with them*. Accordingly the concept institutes an agenda which seeks to explore *semiosis* by bringing together a concern with conceptual activity, interpretive activity, affective activity and practical activity.

Charting Modalities of Response: The Tooth Fairy

As this is an important concept, I will briefly consider how this might be applied to previous research. To do so I will look at Cindy Dell-Clark's (1995) work, which offers a fascinating example of how the 'Tooth Fairy' becomes meaningful for parents and children. This quite effectively demonstrates the different modalities of response involved for each participant, as well as their multiple and perhaps contradictory nature. For example, drawing on empirical research she details that way in which the Tooth Fairy is part of a nexus of practices, for while it is represented in children's texts, it is only drawn into semiosis as parents write notes to the tooth fairy and foster this ritual through social interaction. This in turn is shared through the wider culture of peers and teachers for example, and commoditised in the form of special pouches and so on. What is particularly suggestive however is her account of how the modalities of response are differentiated between children and parents.

For children the practice acts as a means of reassurance over losing their teeth, and the discomfort and anxiety this provokes (Dell-Clark 1995: 9-12). This can be seen as a rite of passage also, as for both children and parents second dentition is a sign of the child growing up, getting older and more independent – of leaving early childhood behind. In the former the modality of response is affective, in the latter it would seem to be an articulation of both the conceptual (a cultural identity) and the affective (an investment in

the idea). Likewise, while the leaving of milk teeth can be seen as symbolic of the child's movement towards the adult world, the gradual process of losing all their teeth also allows for the development of sophisticated conceptualisations of reality and fantasy. Parents reported the gradual growth of disbelief, and a period of oscillation between rational certainty (conceptual modalities) and hopeful belief through imaginative play and fantasy (affective modalities). While of course children still engage in fantasy play once they have developed these conceptual distinctions, Dell-Clark notes that rejecting this is a powerful way for the children to demonstrate their maturity, and to ease their transition into middle childhood and the (conceptual) social identity required (1995: 16). For parents the concern was to delay this transition, for sentimental (affective) reasons, of not wanting them to grow up too fast, and that their children's belief in the tooth fairy (as well as Santa Claus) was a way of keeping the harsh adult world at bay (1995: 7). This represents a quite different modality of response, and a quite different investment in the practice, which is culturally valued, shared and structured.

Methodological issues: the trouble with talk

This argument also suggests a number of pressing methodological issues, for in important ways the distinction between children's developing conceptual ability to account for the relationship between 'everyday reality' and 'textual fantasy', and an alternative agenda which accounts for the *types of meaning* which are produced when children blur these boundaries, is actually a consequence of research methodology. Most pertinently, the majority of research in this area relies on using discourse analysis to reveal what *children's talk* is able to reveal. While as such an approach is extremely valuable, yielding rich research materials, such a methodology ultimately relies on children's ability to *rationalise* or *conceptualise* their viewing in a critical discourse. Messenger-Davies makes the point with clarity while discussing her methodological design. She justifies her decision to exclude younger children from her research, arguing that 'the preschool children *talked* much less frequently than the older ones, and they lacked the *vocabulary* to provide the kind of *critical discourse* sought in the study; thus the decision not to use them was the right one' (1997: 73 my emphasis).

This suggests that we need to consider the ways in which what is identified with this type of research methodology is *not necessarily* a complete account of what goes on in the meaning making process as television is engaged with in particular households. It might in actual fact be more of an indication of the ways in which children's understanding and *conceptual abilities* develop, and of their inability to articulate concepts in complex and embedded ways. This is to recognise that there is a big difference in an ability to *think about* texts critically and the actual *experience* of them as they are drawn into semiosis, *in the process of watching*. The fundamental dilemma is that such a research strategy, and the conceptual agenda raised by the question of modality, is unable to *fully* address the ways in which semiotic modes create certain *types of meaning*. By taking up the question of the modality of response we might be able to pursue this line of enquiry further, in ways which extend beyond this singular account.

Questions of method

These conceptual and methodological issues established, I will now elaborate them by drawing on empirical materials generated for a larger auto-ethnographic study conducted with my son (Isaac) between the ages of seven and twenty months, and my partner, Sara (Briggs 2005). The research materials were generated through producing field-notes in the time honoured tradition of 'just being around', as well as reflecting on our lived experiences of learning how to be a parent for the first time, addressed as we were by a complex field of discourses which 'govern' both childhood and parenthood (Rose 1989; Walkerdine & Lucy 1989; Riley 1983). Following Wolf and Heath (1992), Sefton-Green (2004) and Kelly-Byrne's (1989) auto-ethnographic studies, the research set out to render the details of Isaac's play life and our domestic routines as they intersected with our meaning making with *Teletubbies*. In addition to these field-notes, audio-visual materials of Sara, Isaac and myself watching *Teletubbies* were made. In total sixteen episodes (some eight hours of tape) were fully transcribed following Cochran-Smith (1984) to detail not only what was said and done *in front of the text*, but also its relationship to what was simultaneously being *represented in the text* (see fig 1). During the process of analysis, these materials were subsequently rewritten in narrative form, in the manner presented

below. 

Teletubbies, Pooh & the instability of ontology

With these questions and issues in mind, as I have suggested, the purpose of this paper to set the terms of debate for further research: my own and perhaps others as well. In particular I want to think about the ways in which some of the texts of children's media culture, as well as the play practices in which they are inserted, encourage the blurring of 'ontological realms'. I also want to think about the 'modalities of response' that this generates. Now it may be that I have overstated the issues, and that a great many texts do not seem to encourage this blurring. There are differences across channels in different broadcasting traditions which need to be explored and accounted for. We need to take each example in turn, and the suggestions I make here relate to texts where there is a direct mode of address to the child such as in internationally broadcast series like *Sesame Street*, *Fimbles*, *Blue's Clues* and *Teletubbies*. This is particularly the case for *Teletubbies*, which extends a direct mode of address to the parent and child which has been in evidence since the very early days of *Andy Pandy* in the 1950s. For example, David Oswell cites a 1950 production memo in respect of this, as preschool children are imagined to have 'a close relationship with what is seen on the screen'. Through the character of Andy Pandy, children will be encouraged to play along with the text in various activities: 'a programme which young children may enjoy, taking part in simple movement, games, stories, nursery rhymes and songs' (Maria Bird, in Oswell 2002: 62).

We can see such types of playful response, organised through the text, in the following example, taken from our play when Isaac was 9 months old. Here we are watching *Teletubbies* while playing with a Pooh Bear toy (a gift from his Auntie and Uncle). This toy invites a direct response from the playing child as it runs through a repertoire of phrases and songs prompted by the players as they shake a 'magic rattle'. In some respects, this shaking and speaking resembles the turn taking of a conversation, each shake prompting a phrase, or the next line of a song. More so, it gradually moves around in a circle as it does so, waving and dancing. If unattended for a few moments it

addresses us 'let's play', 'let's hug'.

	Dialogue	Nonverbal action	Text verbal / music	Text visual / action
Matt	Ohhhhh	Isaac is sat beside me, he looks up as I speak and	Tummy Tale	Tummy Tale
Matt	Shall we do it?	crawls away a little, and sits with back to TV, not interested in the Tummy Tale at all.	Child playing violin very poorly (this is quite an unpleasant sound)	Child playing a violin in a domestic sitting room.
Pooh	Pooh bear toy does its song, followed by 'let's play'	I pick up the singing Pooh Bear; activate it once, offering him the shaker, which sets it off.		
Matt	You do it ohhhhh cover your ears, ohhhhh!	He accepts my offer, taking it, we smile at each other, and he		
Pooh	Pooh bear toy does its song, followed by 'look at me'	activates it several times. He occasionally glances back to the TV by twisting his head around for a few seconds as the violins start playing	(Child in tummy tale) Bye Bye, Bye bye Bye bye	Children wave goodbye
Matt	Is that that baby sun?	Isaac gives TV full attention during the baby sun sequence	(Baby sun coos)	Baby Sun
Pooh	Pooh bear toy does its song, says 'fluff and stuff'	Plays with rattle again, not looking at TV, smiling at me	(Falling refrain)	Rabbits on hillside
Matt	Oh dear, is it feeling a bit run down	Isaac pulls him self up on TV stand, trying to touch Po as she appears. He seems to want to touch her	(Po's theme set to a musical ditty)	Po appears on the hillside, in MLS
Matt	Ohhhh ohhhhh careful		(Po) Eh Oh	Says hello Waves to us in MLS

Pooh	(Pooh bear toy activates itself) 'Lets hug'			
Matt	Hello	I wave his arm to Po	(Po) Eh Oh (Dipsy & La La) Eh Oh Po	Rest of the Teletubbies appear. Say hello to each other.
Matt	Say hello to the Teletubbies	Pulls himself up onto TV again, touching the screen as Po speaks		
Pooh	(Pooh bear toy activates itself), 'lets play'	Isaac sits down	(Narrator) One day in Teletubby land Tinky Winky, Dipsy, La La and Po wanted to do a dance	Teletubbies stood in a line, Po at centre, others off slightly to one side
Matt	Ohhhh, you going to have a dance	He touches screen again		
	(pooh bear toy activates itself) 'lets hug'	Loses interest – looks at the decoder box	(Ditty) Ohhhh	MLS of Po dancing, cut between Tinky Winky, Dipsy, La La watching

Fig. 1. Parasocial interaction

What we see in this short exchange, and as I shall explore below in some detail, is a suggestion of a role that is implied by the text through a direct mode of address, but also the ways in which it intersects with a wider nexus of childcare practices and dispositions (Briggs 2006). Taken together I argue that they offered up an implied role to assume, thereby encouraging what Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) have termed 'parasocial interaction'.^[iii] This is defined by the active enactment of a conversational give and take between diegetic characters and real audiences. As we see in Figure 1, it is quite remarkable that in a space of just a few minutes, how consistently the boundary between the two ontological spaces is destabilised through various forms of parasocial interaction: the Pooh Bear toy speaks to us and moves around, *asking us* to do things *with him*; the children wave goodbye *to us* at the end of the tummy tale; Baby Sun smiles

and coos *at us*; Po and Tinky Winky say hello to each other, turn and wave, saying hello *greeting us*; I wave back, waving Isaac's arm as I do so 'Hello, say hello to the Teletubbies'; Isaac, in response, climbs up and touches the screen, he looks as if he wants to hug the Teletubbies, to share the affection relayed between us as we play with the Pooh toy.

In these terms there is an illusion of reciprocity between two distinct ontological spaces: 'the spectator is encouraged to gain the impression that what is taking place on the programme gains a momentum of its own in the very process of being enacted'. Both the Teletubbies and the narrator use a direct mode of address, they talk 'as if he were conversing personally and privately' with the audience. Assuming the implied position we respond with more than a running commentary, rather, we become part of the unfolding action, 'participating in the show by turns' (Horton & Wohl 1956: 215-17). This parasociality is a question of form, since textual form governs our experience of content. In these terms, both formally and ontologically the textual Tinky Winky and Po and the toy Pooh are similar: all greet us, waving and saying hello, all seem to want to include us in hugs, wanting to play, they sing, move and dance, have conversations, do things unexpectedly (and of their own volition); all can be shared with daddy; they exist on screen (confusing to touch, they always feel the same), in books, but also as things to be cuddled, taken to bed (they are there when you wake up). This instability acts in concert, one after another:

Pooh Bear: 'Let's Play' 'Look at Me' (speaking / dancing)

Children: 'Bye bye, bye bye, bye bye' (waving at us)

Baby Sun: 'Cooooooo' (making eye contact with us)

Pooh Bear: 'Winnie the Pooh, Winnie the Pooh' (singing)

Po: 'Eh Oh' (waving at us)

Daddy: 'Hello' (waving Isaac's arm)

Isaac: 'Hello' (touching Po on the screen)

Daddy: 'Hello, say hello to the Teletubbies' (waving Isaac's arm)

Po: 'Eh Oh Tinky Winky' (greeting)

Tinky Winky: 'Eh Oh Po' (greeting)

Isaac: 'Hello' (touching Tinky Winky on the screen)

Pooh Bear: 'Let's play' (waving at us)

Pooh Bear: 'Let's hug' (soliciting / wriggling)

In this sense, the implied role inaugurates a relationship, a position to adopt, if the text is to 'make sense' or work. Indeed, this might account for the incomprehension that audiences experience when they refuse to meet *Teletubbies* on its own terms. As Horton and Wohl argue: 'a spectator who fails to make the anticipated responses will find himself further and further removed from the base-line of common understanding'. In this case, as one gets further and further away from the implied position, the viewer will be 'forced to resign in confusion, disgust, anger or boredom' (1956: 221). This of course is not obligatory as one can refuse or negotiate this position. However, as they suggest, if the programme is to make sense and cohere, one must to some degree assume this implied position. As they put it:

The role of the persona is enacted in such a way, or is of such a character, that the appropriate answering role is specified by *implication* and *suggestion*. The persona's performance, therefore, is open-ended, calling for a rather specific answering role to give it closure (1956: 219, my emphasis).

Parasocial interreaction and the modality of response

This parasociality and the implied role it produces are significant with regards to how we think about semiosis and the relationship between conceptual and affective modalities of response. On one hand, conceptually speaking, to play is to secure the boundaries between fantasy and reality, and to breach the divide in a playful manner serves to reinstate the antimony, for boundary and breach imply one another. This doubtless was the case for Sara and myself for we were never *confused*. However, there are limits to such conceptualisation, for to play is *also* to renounce such logical concerns, to negate

the distinction, and to enter into a 'play frame' such as that which produces our emotional responses to fictional material (c.f. Buckingham 1996). We have to play the game and allow ourselves to meet the text on its own terms, which is perhaps a requirement not to *think* about it: not to rationalise. However, Isaac had no need of negation for he knew nothing of our adult concerns, and the imperatives to clearly distinguish between fantasy and reality. He had no need for a secure foundation for thought. Rather, I will argue that Isaac knew in a different subjective register: that of the experience of the text, of the affect it afforded and a meeting of our minds and bodies.

As I suggested, this is of some significance with to relation the modalities of our responses, and in what follows I suggest the ways in which adopting this implied role was to become a defining way of relating, of an almost direct contact between Isaac and the Teletubbies. However this wasn't restricted to the Teletubbies themselves, for the formal organisation of this parasocial contact was reproduced in other practices around the text. In doing so, by extending the points I developed with Dell-Clark's materials, I will suggest that Isaac was making connections between the text and the world in playful and affective (which is to say, embodied and experiential) modalities of response. Seen in such terms of reference, to ask whether the worlds represented in books, television programmes or toys are 'real' or 'unreal' to a child in the first few years of life makes absolutely no sense (Kelly 1981). Rather, we also need to ask: how did you experience that? How was it for you? It also suggests that we could reorient our research agendas away from just asking questions about the way in which commercial media and play cultures dull *an assumed* genetic predisposition to childhood imagination (e.g. Kline 1993), and that we could also think about the ways in which imaginative modalities of response are culturally produced (c.f. Miller et al 2000; Machin & Messenger-Davies 2003). As such, in the following example, I present some of the ways in which Isaac was learning about reality and fantasy, and the complex and shifting modal relationships involved through this affective and experiential modality of response. By doing so, he was learning the culturally organised and sanctioned patterns of response. He was being socialised into the worlds of play and fiction.

Playing Teletubbies

It's October, Isaac is now sixteen months old. He, Sara and myself are watching *Teletubbies*. As the tummy tale starts Isaac becomes animated. Having just waved hello to the Teletubbies, he jumps up off the floor in front of the television where he is sitting. He does so to get a better view of a spider that is shown in extreme close up. Filling the screen, it is bigger than Isaac's head; he has never seen anything like this before. He is clearly interested in this and pays attention, fascinated as the children in the tummy tale look for spiders. He vocalises 'ohhh eyaaaah!' and I interpret this as a question by joining in the wonder: 'what's that, is it a spider?!' Isaac points to the spider on the screen and waves at him ('hello!'). This way of knowing however taps into a wider pattern of relatedness, and therefore the multiple practices and textual sites which shaped our activity as an 'audience' (Briggs 2006). Isaac for example had been asking 'what's that?' questions for a while (along with 'it's gone' and 'it's there' statements). The text, structured to encourage parasocial interaction, is attuned to this stage in cognitive development, and the narrator's voice seemed to respond by explaining all about the spider's web, to both the on-screen children and us in the living room. This implied parasociality was a common mode of address, for while watching another preschool programme *Come Outside* a few days prior to this, Isaac sat transfixed on my lap as caterpillar weaved a cocoon in beautiful close-up photography. He tells me what the dog in the programme (Pippin) says 'woof', and waves hello. From my position, 'inside' the ethnography, I am able to identify that he has learnt the animal noises from our reading of Rod Campbell's *Dear Zoo*, a book which we constantly 'play' as I out the noises and characteristics of the animals on each page.

In the same way, as the children say goodbye in the tummy tale, I extend the parasocial interaction: 'Say bye-bye little spider'. The dialogic structure of the text invites me to do this, as does Isaac's way of relating. For instance, just now, the wallpaper on the computer has a picture of him next to our friends' dog (with a name, just like everybody else - Hector). He can't walk by without stopping to say hello: 'woof'. He has been interested in animals for a few months now (he has been taken to the zoo since he was just a few months old, where, like other children, he says hello to the animals). Again, this is hardly surprising; many of his books have animals addressing him, animals with lives and feelings like his own: Wibbly Pig, Pooh Bear and the Teletubbies themselves. It's not just on television and picture books however cats and dogs in the park,

aeroplanes (and especially helicopters) in the sky, fire engines: anything that he is interested in is treated in this way, and we clearly encourage it. This parasocial interaction therefore extends beyond *Teletubbies*, and suggests not only a common implied role across a number of texts and play practices which circulate in children's media culture, but also the ways in which Sara and myself learnt to recognise them, and mediated them to Isaac as parents who were responding to the pedagogic value that is placed on play and 'the imagination' (see Briggs 2006; Cochran Smith 1984: 175-83).

In this, Isaac is engaged in the cognitive and conceptual modalities of learning and designation (Lemish & Rice 1985). This is organised through our imaginative play as we make a connection between the text and the world by communicating *as if* the spider was sentient and able to reciprocate. In Barker and Brook's (1998) terms, this play has meaning, but it is not exclusively 'ideational'. It wasn't only *about something*; it didn't just represent the world in some way. Rather, the modality of the response was affective: it seemed to be about the experience of watching, an experience which is rooted as much in the body as the mind. It is shaped by his *interest*, a complex of 'physiological, psychological, emotional, cultural and social origins' which shapes our focus on an environment, our ways of being, acting, and meaning making (Kress 1997: 11). In part, by definition, as I argued above, you had to be there to experience this meaning: the joy of taking part (of what this feels like), the pleasure of watching together (interpersonally), the sharing of this interest (of attention, alertness, responsiveness) and of the intersubjective communion this implies.

We see this imaginative modality of response as it is afforded in the second telling of the spider tummy tale. While Isaac is interested in the spiders again, I tiring of seeing them for a second time, use it as a support for another sort of game. Initially I attempt to distract his attention from the screen by interanimating the voices of a nursery rhyme (Incey Wincey Spider) and the real tummy tale spider. However, Isaac vocalises in his excitement, an indication of the embodied modality of his meaning making:

'baaahhhhh'. I harness this affective modality (this embodied state of alertness and interest) by cuing a game: 'Issey, is that Incey Wincey spider? You know what happens when it rains?' Hardly responding, still focused on the television, once again an extreme close up of the spider on the screen, he turns to look at me as I speak, and back to the

television again; Sara joins in with the word play: 'It's Incey Wincey!' I carry on the game, crawling up behind Isaac:

'Incey Wincey spider climbed up the rain spout'

'Down came the rain and washed him all out'

'Our came the sun and dried up all the rain'

'Incey Wincey spider'....imitating the spider moving across his face and tickling him with a big shimmy: 'Ghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...climbed up the spout again!'

Isaac runs across to mummy, to be saved in mock fear, playfully hugging her legs (we will remember the earlier monkey response where we see the similarly affective 'tensions' of fear and delight, danger and affection). He climbs up onto her lap, to watch again as the diegetic spider spins her web. Not safe, Sara 'crawls' her fingers across his face. I continue: 'out came the sun and dried up all the raaaaaaain'. Isaac stands up on Sara's lap as she waves goodbye to the children and the spider: 'bye bye..... where have all the Teletubbies gone?' Isaac, delighted, giggles.

Again, to understand the modalities of this meaning making, we need to consider the provenance of the media, play and parenting practices that are embedded in this, the way we drew the text into ongoing semiosis. For example, we played *Incey Wincey Spider* regularly, and it is really imported from multiple contexts. As a new parent, not knowing many nursery rhymes, I first started singing them when I came across a *Teletubbies* screensaver that would run through a whole range (London Bridge is Falling Down, Little Bo Peep and so on). Isaac loved sitting on my lap, watching animations of the Teletubbies scroll across the page, while I sang along. However, the screensaver draws on a strong cultural tradition, and most nursery rhymes have associated movements that are to be performed to accompany the words. Just like *Teletubbies*, there is an implied role here that suggests a script for *enacting*. We join in physically; our bodies are drawn into semiosis: we sing, exhale, smile, run our fingers across our faces, giggle, squirm,

and hug. This cultural tradition was imported into our meaning making: we were playing the game, where the meaning, its significance, extends beyond the words or 'textual meaning'. Rather, as Herman Bausinger (1984) suggested some years ago, the meaning seems to be located in the practice itself, or rather the process of enacting it, of coordinating the movements, and of sharing such intimacies.

These intimacies (these affective modalities of response) continue as Isaac, Sara and I start playing the Incey Wincey Spider game again, until a favourite 'Animal Parade' sequence starts on *Teletubbies*. This is a regular sequence where a long line of digitally animated animals parade through the hillside in Telytubbyland, accompanied by a very rhythmic soundtrack. In this, the music adopts the persona of each animal (for example, a 'boom boom boom' for the elephants, a 'fluttering' for the butterflies, a 'staccato' for the flamingos, and a vaguely 'eastern' inflection for the snakes). As I view the tape now, and as I refer to the notes that I made at the time, it is clear that Isaac clearly recognised the sequence. First Sara anticipates that an animated sequence (the magic) is about to begin with the regular appearance of the windmill. Once again she addresses Isaac in an attempt to structure his viewing, to focus his interest: 'Issey look, it's going to be magic'. We both repeat this immediately, in harmony:

'It's the magic!'

'It's the magic!'

Isaac clearly recognises the onscreen cue and anticipates the 'magic'. He has loved these sequences since he was twelve months old. He jumps up onto my lap and is extremely excited, as I will it to be a rare Bo Peep sequence 'please let it be Bo Peep... what's it going to be?!' Isaac vocalises his excitement in turn 'De de de de yahhhhh ohhhhhhhhhh'. As he recognises the animal parade music (seemingly before I do) he jumps up, unable to contain his excitement as he runs across to the television pointing and squealing with delight and wonder. He turns and runs over to the toy unit, throwing his head back and banging his hands on the top: he is *bursting* as it starts, you can *feel*

it in his movements - even as I view the tape. I feel something of Isaac's closeness of being with mummy and daddy, and of the sharing of his delight, and the affective states that accompanies it. This is meaning in this context, at that moment when we drew the text into semiosis, as it punctuated our incessant meaning making (Kress 2000).

Once Isaac returns his attention back to the television Sara once again assumes the implied position. In much the same way as we played the *Incey Wincey Spider* nursery rhyme, Sara interanimates the animal parade with Isaac's book *Dear Zoo*. By doing so, she adopts the voice of the onscreen narrator while Isaac watches, fiddling with a small plastic dog 'knasher':

'Tigers what do they say'

'It's the penguins'

'Pssssh slithery snakes':

I ask, 'is that the elephants?' and to our delight Isaac lifts his arm in the air, mimicking an elephant's trunk as I do when we read *Dear Zoo*.

'You know what elephants do?' copying the action, I do my usual elephant impersonation 'they go uuuuuuuuuuuuudh'

'Is it the giraffes next?' I wonder, while Sara corrects me,

'No flamingos'.

'Ahh' I whistle along to the tune while Sara keeps up the commentary

'Butterflies...mmmmmmmm'

'Huhh it's the giraffes'

I do the *Dear Zoo* movement again, reaching right up into the sky

'How Tall are they, they're taaaalllllllllllll!'

'Yeah, right up to the sky' while Sara waves goodbye, joining in with the *Dear Zoo* theme:

'Oh, it's the frogs! Ribbit'

'They're the last ones aren't they?'

'Bye-Bye animals...'

Throughout this each movement, and our commentary, are cued by the text; we act along with it as the animals move by on their parade. It is quite clear that this is enacted, in much the same way as the nursery rhyme. This isn't *watching television*, any more that we sit quietly and read books: both are toys, drawn into semiosis, as we play the games they afford (Briggs, forthcoming). These games would seem to blur the boundaries between the two worlds. They encourage an experiential form of response where meanings exist *in participation*: in the pleasure of play, in the relationships between us and the onscreen characters, and their apparent reciprocation of our interest.

However, the meanings are not simply generated through a singular practice, for our Teletubby play was situated in a nexus of practice. In this sense, meaning and its structuring by the text cannot be adduced from the analysis of the text alone. We have to move outwards to the context, to our common practice of reading *Dear Zoo*, cuddled up on my lap, doing the moves together (with all the anticipation this infers). But more than this we would often play 'animal parade' on the *CBeebies* website, Isaac sat on my lap as I bumped him along to the rhythm. He loved this, as I helped him click on the animals. This movement, the memories, the anticipation, the experience of our wider

practices and patterns of relatedness were drawn in, each animating the other in a specifically experiential modality of response.

Text, context & play: beyond a question of ontology?

My purpose in this extended account has been to thickly describe something of the way in which *Teletubbies* was a form of play, of the ludic space it afforded, but also, of the pre-existing meanings and practices within which it was inserted. I have suggested some of the ways that the ontological status of *Teletubbies* as textual fantasy becomes problematic when it is inserted into multiple practices that make up the everyday. Here we see the text at the moment that its semiotic affordances are realised. In this moment the text becomes *saturated with the context* as it is drawn into semiosis.

I have argued that this meaning making is not fully accountable for with the concept of modality as it is usually applied. At this age, Isaac was not developmentally able to conceptualise the messy distinctions between reality and fantasy (Flavell et al. 1990; Troseth & DeLoache 1998). As such, as a preverbal child, Isaac seemed to be making meanings through his experience, in affective modalities of response. I have argued following Dell-Clark's analysis, that this ludic space is a product of practice as it is created through the enactments of play. As such, it is co-constructed and validated by Sara and myself, who were drawing on the semiotic and discursive resources of our culture, and the 'meaning potentials' that they contained. [\[iii\]](#) These intersected, in complex ways, with the dynamics of our relationship, of our particular feelings about our own childhoods, and our relationships, no doubt, with our own parents now (Dell-Clark 1995: 110; Taylor 1999: 56). These practices form a *childcare habitus* which is culturally regulated (Briggs, 2006 c.f. Walkerdine & Lucy 1989; Rose 1989). Out of this confluence emerged a particular practice: we deliberately blurred the two realms, making multiple connections between them. This was the way that we played; it was the singular way through which *Teletubbies* was drawn into semiosis.

Of course, as Tidhar & Lemish (2003) and Messenger Davies (1997) for example have argued, Isaac can be seen here as he starts exploring these troubled conceptual boundaries. He was starting to experience the difference between the *Teletubbies* on

screen and the Teletubby plush toy that he cuddled in bed: between his worldly and textual experiences. As such, by identifying such an implied role, constructed as it is across a nexus of practice, we see the very beginnings of the way in which Isaac was being socialised into the world of fiction, or rather, *into the world of play*. In this ontogenesis we see the ways in which he would start to learn about modality, which is to say, the ways in which he would learn to negotiate this fragile and problematic ontology, or perhaps to work out what can be done in each, how they can be combined and manipulated for different semiotic and communicative ends. Indeed, as play studies have demonstrated, this might well demonstrate the very beginnings of Isaac's metacommunicative abilities: the ability to construct and negotiate an appropriate play frame (Kelly-Byrne 1989).

Such an analysis not only accords with Messenger-Davies' arguments, which suggest some of the ways that children learn how to make increasingly subtle judgements, both about external modal markers (such as cultural knowledge, scientific knowledge and real life experience), but also about internal markers, which draws upon their accruing knowledge of media forms and conventions (1997:123). It also suggest the ways in which Isaac, as a 'preverbal' child, was learning about different modalities of response: not only about the appropriate way *to orient to a text*, but also about the *sort of meanings that can be exchanged* in doing so. Meaning in this case is a product of the ecology within which it emerges as much as it is a property of the text. It is a product of practice, and this practice seems to be as much about learning how to play, as it does to be learning how to 'read' or 'watch'. It is clear that we need to know a lot more about this ecological context of practice if we want to enquire about the 'significance' of texts, however that is conceptualised.

Towards a pedagogy of affect

While there are wider methodological consequences to these points, which suggest some of the limits in research methodologies which rely on critical discourse and self-reports, there are also wider conceptual points that need addressing in Media Studies, as well as in pedagogical theory. One such point is that to ask the fantasy-reality question

is to presume limited types of cognitive response, and to assume a somewhat critical agenda of media literacy. This assumes that it is important for children to be able to make these distinctions as early as possible, as this will afford 'protection' from the mass media, whether this is ideological, pedagogic, or behavioural (e.g. Giroux 1994).

While these approaches are important, the arguments I have raised here have further implications insofar as they suggest an agenda that approaches texts as a form of play rather than as representational forms. This 'ludic' approach for example would benefit the study of Disney, for while recent research (e.g. Wasko et al. 2006) had begun to consider audience responses, non has systematically considered the implications for meaning making when Disney texts are drawn into semiosis as part of a wider play culture. This play culture might include themed dressing-up outfits (from the Little Mermaid to Buzz Lightyear for example), clothes, figurines, accessories, toys, costume jewellery, puzzles, computer games, bedspreads, web sites, spin-offs on Disney Cinemagic, DVDs and magazines (see Briggs forthcoming). Furthermore, we would need to consider the ways in which Disney texts become meaningful through family holidays to Disneyland, as well as in wider peer cultures (in the playground or nursery perhaps). Clearly the type of intensely described 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) which is afforded by auto-ethnography is one such way to trace the complex process of semiosis in this nexus of activities, histories, identities and desires.

This has further implications insofar as it raises the question of pedagogy, in two connected ways. The first is important for while the experience of play is certainly pleasurable as its modality of response works in affective registers, it would be a mistake to divorce the issues of play and affect from learning and pedagogy. Indeed, it might be the 'interest' that affect secures which makes learning more effective, as Elspeth Probyn (2004: 26-7) has recently argued. This has implications for the second approach to pedagogy, more common in North American Cultural Studies, where it is conceptualised as an ideological process. Henry Giroux (1999) for example thinks about Disney as 'public pedagogy' which has become, in his words, 'a substantial, if not primary, educational force' (1999: 2). While audience investments are acknowledged, such conceptualisations tend to reduce them to pleasure, and then to something that is somehow removed from the process of meaning making. In turn, meaning itself is narrowly conceived in ideational terms alone, while all forms of affective response are

reduced to this poorly thought out account of pleasure (see for example Bell et al 1995; Bryne & McQuillan 1999; Phillips & Wojcik – Andrews 1996; Szumsky 2000; Trites 1991; Zipes 1996).

These issues suggest the need as Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green argue, for a conceptualisation of pedagogy as a *participative process*, rather than an ‘induction of knowledge’ (2003, pp. 396-7). As I have argued, this is a question of thinking through not only *what* people are learning, but also with *how they learn*, and the *modalities of semiosis* involved. It is perhaps not only about ideation, but also ‘a matter of learning how to behave, what to want *and feel*, and how to respond... about *forms of consciousness*’ (2003, pp. 391-5, my emphasis). This is to think of pedagogy as a way of approaching the relationship between texts (teachers) and audiences (learners), which doesn't presuppose types of meaning and response, or prefigure these before the event. It requires that due attention be paid to the dynamics of the process, ‘not just on the learning that arises as a result of transmission, induction or training, but also on the learning learners might do by themselves and in their own right’ (2003, pp. 396-7).

Clearly, in the present research, Sara and myself are responding to the institutional address of the BBC, as well as to a much wider discourses that address parents as pedagogues (Buckingham & Scanlon 2001). As I have argued elsewhere (Briggs 2006) Sara and I recognised this address: it accorded with the dispositions of our emergent childcare habitus; we willingly adopted the implied position. In doing so we were assuming the identity of the ‘good parents’. This requires further research, for just how families with other childcare dispositions negotiated this discursive and textual address remains unclear. Equally, so does the ability of the auto-ethnographic method to address this, which might be limited to those with the required educational and cultural capital in the first place. What is clear however is the need for methodological creativity: of taking chances, of being inventive, and of finding ways to allow research participants to generate their own thick, rich and evocative research materials. Talk is one valuable way of generating these, but as I have demonstrated, other methods will be needed to capture something of the thick and embedded texture of lived media experience. The challenge here is great if we are to know more about these modalities of response.

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Fimbles. Novel Entertainmnet. UK. (2002 -)

Sesame Street. Sesame Workshop. USA. (1969 -)

Teletubbies. Ragdoll Productions. UK. (1997 – 2001)

[i] As auto-ethnography raises considerable unease from research traditions which stress objectivity as an epistemological value, some epistemological justification for research is required. Briefly, following Kelly-Byrne (1989), the present work is informed by Alfred Schutz's (1954) rethinking of the split between objectivity and subjectivity. In an important argument he argues that the insistence on applying the formal methods of the natural sciences in the social sciences ignores the particular problems and situations the social scientist faces, as well as the particular consequences of adopting the doctrine of positive 'sense data' as being the only reliable basis of empirical data. The problem is that this position admits only *overtly observable and controllable behaviour* and this therefore excludes the domain of meaning and 'social reality' from study. In this domain of social reality, which I have referred to as experience, understanding is construed in intersubjective contexts, between people, *as they communicate and interact* (Schutz 1954: 257-67). As such the emphasis in auto-ethnography is to be placed as much on experience, *or on the process of knowing*, as on the knowledge itself. Exact formal knowledge and the procedures that are said to guarantee it are not recognised as privileged forms of knowledge over and above the particular and the plural. This follows precisely as the split between objectivity and subjectivity is denied in favour of a commitment to *intersubjectivity*. Belief in objective knowledge, which takes as its datum a singular reality simply existing 'out there' is denied in favour of a view in which reality is intersubjectively construed rather than objectively given (Kelly-Byrne 1989: 9). As Valerie Walkerdine (1997) argues, this means *not only* acknowledging, but *also* exploring the multiple contexts and subject positions that I as researcher occupied, as well as my own thoughts and feelings: my biases, concerns, prejudices, history, imagined futures and fantasies, things which are always present in 'objective' methodologies, but negated (Walkerdine 1997: 66-77; Kelly-Byrne 1989: 217-9). For a very much extended elaboration, see Briggs (2005)

[ii] This difficult to source paper has been usefully reprinted in *Participations* Vol. 3 (1) (May 2006)

[iii] See Briggs, forthcoming, for further discussion of 'meaning potentials', and their organisation between texts and toy intertexts.

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