# Techno-Habitats and Media Habits:

## Reflections on Contemporary Children's Television

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Children born in the new millennium pre-reflectively experience a technological lifeworld as nature itself—not a *second* nature that, on the basis of an already formed identity, they learn to cope with, but the *primary* natural habitat in which they develop motor skills, language, and subjectivity.[1] Technologies and media are 'givens' for children, and are 'incorporated' seamlessly—without a thought—into their daily life.[2] Rightly concerned that their offspring should transcend this primordial thoughtlessness and become discriminating techno-media consumers, parents face a dilemma: should kids be kept innocent until they are mature enough to deal responsibly with technology, or should we expose them to media at an early age and in this way encourage them to become competent media users, rather than mindless media consumers?

When should I let my child use a computer, take up a mouse and chase a cursor across the screen—where not just hand-eye coordination but a whole-body calibration with the technical environment is at stake? At what age do children 'need' a mobile phone? When are kids ready for their first digicam, or responsible enough to surf the internet? Each new device or medium demands a new decision. But for many parents, the first and paradigmatic decision concerns the 'old' medium of television. Attacked for turning children into non-athletic but hyperactive zombies with shortened attention spans and tendencies towards impulsive consumerism, television focuses vague worries about a technological habitat into more palpable concerns over a variety of 'bad habits'. Yet children's television is booming, targeting ever younger audiences while responding openly to parents' trepidations. As a result of this dual address, programming has become

highly self-reflexive—a fact which I take here as an occasion to scrutinise my own interests in the shows that my pre-school aged child watches. Typically, scholarly and popular discussions focus on whether children's programming helps or hinders youngsters' ability to successfully navigate the world that they inherit from adults. Looking at the issue from an alternative angle, I suggest that parents may unwittingly approach kids' TV from the perspective of very different instructional goals. As I probe my engagement with children's programming, I find that I certainly value content that will educate my child, but perhaps my ultimate hope with regard to the medium of children's television is that it will also teach *me* to understand the contours of my child's techno-mediated world and my own.

Recognising parents' desires to encourage responsible media choices and good viewing habits, producers of children's television invest considerable energy into public relations, trying to convince parents not of the medium's innocence but of their programmes' positive educational value. On the basis of empirical research by pediatric psychologists which informs the programmes' pacing, content and mode of address, marketers suggest that children's shows aid the development of *natural* abilities, such as cognition, language and empathy. Yet children's programming today is overwhelmingly technological in content, filled with futuristic gadgets, talking vehicles, and machines with a mind of their own. In order to understand the broader significance of these programmes for both children and parents, we should interrogate the notion that science-fiction fantasies can foster natural abilities in the real world.

The paradox of promoting natural capacities via a technology-obsessed medium runs deep, and it speaks to the apparent contradiction that centrally informs our children's lifeworld—their natural habitat *is* technological. Significantly, the paradox is especially pronounced in programmes aimed at the youngest viewers. *Teletubbies*, for example, introduces toddlers to the television-viewing experience and its conventions of framing, perspective, and continuity in a double fashion: that is, the series' medium, television,

also functions as the show's self-reflexively mediated content or 'message'. Much of the action takes place in long shots, providing spatial orientation to unaccustomed viewers; cuts are never jarring; and children are eased into the codes of camera movement and perspective through a sort of *fort/da* game in which characters and objects move repeatedly between foreground and background. Codes taken by adults as transparently legible are treated as something to be learned, and the series thus engages in a normative pedagogy of television-viewing: a 'how to' approach to TV for beginners. But then 'normal' viewing relations are abruptly short-circuited. The antennae on the teletubbies' heads light up, broadcast reception is tested, and the camera zooms in on a belly-embedded television set. The teletubbies literally embody their televisions. And our children, as they watch, are learning to incorporate their own and see *through* the screen to a spatio-temporal world beyond. But against the 'suture' of classical narrative cinema, the mediating apparatus is also objectified *in* mediated perception. Attention is divided between mediation as process and as object, and the real apparatus in the living-room takes on a concrete opacity, leading the child out of the spectacle and back to a material relation between body and physical screen.

Less obviously, shows like *Bob the Builder*, *Engie Benjy*, or *Lunar Jim* highlight mediation as they follow childlike humans in their negotiations with technology. Bob's and Benjy's many vehicles are literally 'animated', both as characters and as products of animation techniques in a narrower sense. Rather than hiding this duality, these narratives of human-machine interaction point towards the child's engagement with TV, indirectly sensitising young viewers to the medial surface of the screen: the plasticity of stop-motion then stands in contrast to cel animation, 2D and 3D computer graphics. Lunar Jim and his robot dog explore the moon with a palette of multifunctional vehicles, perform experiments assigned by computer Pixel, and solve problems with fantastic gadgets. Problem-solving is undertaken in a manner that encourages children to put clues together for themselves and

deduce the solution just before the show's protagonist does. Each episode ends with Jim contemplating the stars through his telescope's display-screen and reflecting on his 'technicised' adventures, just as children are presumably expected to reflect on their adventures in TV land.

With interactivity, self-reflexivity, and medium-sensitivity as cornerstones, these shows are in the process of articulating a critical media pedagogy designed to immunise our children against passive, unreflective media consumption.[3] Interestingly, those cornerstones distinguished early cinema from classical Hollywood's diegetic absorption of the spectator.[4] Arguably, they also characterise sci-fi films' show-stopping special-effects displays—spectacles that self-reflexively highlight the latest filmic techniques, draw the viewer out of the narrative, and encourage awareness of film as a medium.[5] Indeed, it is in this vein that the sci-fi mode of kids' TV explored here offers a promising means of involving children in media while inoculating them to immersive 'zombification'—an ideal medium, therefore, for fostering media competency in the double sense of proficiency and responsibility.

But how do kids really inhabit these media spaces? We should not forget that children born after *Toy Story* do not recognise computer animation as revolutionary; if CGI is becoming habitual for us, it began that way for kids. Perhaps interactivity, self-reflexivity, and medium-sensitivity apply more to parents' mode of viewing than to children's—part of producers' appeals to the adults who, as 'responsible' parents, are expected to watch with their children. As concerned adults and parents, we desire a critical pedagogy—and perhaps it is *we* who need it. Our hardly passive cyborg children, knowing only techno-nature, may already possess a 'hard-wired' competence that eludes us. Critically but intently watching kid-TV's techno-narratives with my son, am I perhaps seeking entry into *his* fascinatingly alien habitat and a justifying transcendence of *my own* media habits?

[1] Comparable in many respects to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus," the term "lifeworld" (Lebenswelt) derives from the phenomenological tradition and designates the primordial sphere of human action and perception—an experiential realm of everyday practice that is necessarily prior to reflective analysis. It is in this sense that I employ the term here, and a broadly phenomenological orientation informs this essay's basic theoretical-methodological approach.

[2] Philosopher of technology Don Ihde uses the term "embodiment relation" to describe the fact that many technologies, when put to use and functioning normally, are literally "incorporated" into bodily practice as extensions of our sensorimotor capacities. As such, they withdraw from our awareness and form an unobtrusive background for perception and action. See, for example, Don Ihde, *Technics and Praxis: A Philosophy of Technology* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979) and Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). This is also the phenomenon underlying Heidegger's famous discussion of the hammer and Merleau-Ponty's description of the blind man's cane. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, trans. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962), 98-99, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith, trans. (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 165-66.

[3] In my discussion of *Teletubbies* above, I identified a "normative media pedagogy" articulated in the first phase of the show, where the emphasis is on promoting "normal" viewing relations, i.e. the child's ability to see *through* the screen and reconstruct a coherent spatio-temporal world from individual shots and perspectives. In its second, self-reflexive phase, the show encourages viewers to look *at* the screen and moves toward what I am now calling a "critical media pedagogy," promoting a critical *distance* for reflecting on media involvements. Clearly, this second type of pedagogy is no less normative or value-laden than the first, nor are the two absolutely opposed. Indeed, all of the shows discussed here can be said to promote normal viewing relations as the necessary background upon which critical (and therefore to a certain extent "abnormal") relations may be instantiated.

[4] Cf. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]," *Wide Angle* 8.3-4 (1986): 63-70.

[5] Drawing on the work of Tom Gunning, Brooks Landon argues that science-fiction film, especially as regards special effects in their function of showing off the latest cinematic technologies, is a carryover from the "cinema of attractions." See Brooks Landon, "Diegetic or Digital? The Convergence of Science-Fiction Literature and Science-Fiction Film in Hypermedia," in *Alien Zone II*, Annette Kuhn, ed. (London: Verso, 1999), 31-49.