☐ Lally, Elaine:

At Home with Computers

Oxford: Berg (2002). ISBN 1-85973-561-4 (pbk), pp. 246

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Past Issues

A Review by Robert Jewitt

At Home With Computers explores how a technological artefact such as the personal home computer, accrues meaning through a range of process such as home-building, ownership and consumption, the redrafting of time and space relations, mediation across physical and mental boundaries, and the construction of self-identity. The starting point for Lally's book is to highlight the significance of material items in the production and reproduction of everyday culture. Lally claims that computers are 'powerful cultural symbols' capable of 'profoundly reshaping the world around us' (p.1), especially when contextualised within the domestic realm.

The book emerges from Lally's PhD thesis which draws upon the results of interview data, undertaken in 31 diverse households in western Sydney and comprising of 95 individuals. Initial formal interviews were conducted in 1996 and were supplemented with informal follow-up interviews, often undertaken in the interviewee's home or workplace. Lally includes a range of different household types (including the elderly, single-parent households, etc) in order to provide a more complex analysis of a range of different experiences of the home computer than much of the previously literature on the uses of information communication technology has produced.

Lally introduces the reader to a range of issues and themes and then tests these ideas against the backdrop of her interview subjects. It is here that Lally introduces the reader to the Mafredottis family in the guise of a case study. This serves to connect the themes that Lally has previously introduced within a tangible context.

With a clear and insightful writing style Lally argues that the experiences of consuming, owning and using a computer are continual processes, through which we construct and negotiate the understanding of our relationships with other everyday objects, people and spaces. It is not just that we affect the meaning of objects, but that they also have their own constraining and enabling affects upon the meaning-making process. Lally's subjects both 'adopt and contradict' (p.3) the widely circulated discourses of home computing and everything that the term entails, bringing into question the legitimacy of institutional voices via the exploration of material culture in action.

The second chapter begins by drawing on the work of Daniel Miller (after Hegel) in order to explore the relationship of ownership via the concept of 'objectification' (p.25). This

serves to act as the connecting block between home-building, ownership and technology – the major themes which continue throughout the book. Drawing on Giddens, Lally (p.44) argues that material objects and possessions, the home computer in particular, act as 'scaffolding' for the self, yet they also provide us with potential threats to our sense of ontological security as they have the potential to mediate between physical and mental worlds, between the present and imagined alternative states.

Lally includes an interesting historical account which looks at the changing representations of home computing through the prism of lifestyle advertising and the ongoing evolution of computer functionality. She fits the domestication of the home computer with a social shaping of technology thesis familiar to many. This connects well to the following chapter in which the culmination of the issues raised thus far begin to be applied against the responses of her interviewees. Lally explores anxieties surrounding technological progress as embodied in discourses surrounding the home computer, particularly in relation to education and employment. The incorporation of the computer into the home allows for an analysis of individual response to wider social forces, resulting in reflective responses from the interviewees on issues such as the ethics of software piracy, self-development and cultural competences.

Subsequent chapters explore the spatial and temporal changes brought about by the presence of a computer in the home, with particular emphasis focussing upon the relationships between different household members. Lally looks at how the home computer is used by parents and children for educational purposes (with the former managing the latter's use of the device); how computer based game-playing can be seen as a social activity, particularly as men play with their children; the use of the internet to facilitate mediated interaction and its function as an information utility. Overall, the computer becomes effectively integrated into the everyday household activity over time and its usage becomes effectively normalised.

When exploring the role of gender in computer use Lally indicates that the items themselves are designed and manufactured in such ways that serve to exclude or discourage women. The computer symbolises masculine values and ideals. However, the women in Lally's study gained a sense of empowerment through their mastery of the home computer as they resist what they perceive to be cultural ideas of how women are supposed to act. Following Van Zoonen and Cockburn, Lally's respondents fit the model of gender as dynamic and not fixed. For them, the relationship between objects and expectations is relational and flexible.

Building on the relational notion of objects, the later chapters explore the aesthetics of the home computer, focussing on the place of the computer in the home. Lally includes photographs of her interviewees' computers in their domestic environment whilst discussing how the computer has to relate to other domestic objects. The beige box and monitor can seem out of place in the home environment and this is something many of her household members have to negotiate.   The home computer as a 'machine for living' (p.175) transforms the relationships and functions between other household objects in a

collaborative way. They have to compete with furniture and other objects in order to secure their space. It would be worth Lally revisiting this notion in light of the recent evolution of home computers as the beige box in the corner of the living room to the current trend for them to be aesthetically desirable integrated media centres (typified by Apple's iMac range).

There are a number of minor criticisms which can be levelled at Lally, one of which is the integration of her audience research material. We are seldom given much in the way of information about each individual household's constitutional setup, family dynamic or consumption style, as most of the quotations from Lally's interviewees are integrated to suit her thesis and are often devoid of contextualisation. As a result, we are kept at a restrained distance from the raw data. This is a minor criticism and one which Lally pre-empts to some degree by the inclusion of a brief appendix which provides some welcome background information about her subjects and their main types of computer use. One other criticism can be levelled at Lally in that for all the emphasis she place upon the relational nature of objects, we seldom see this followed through in relation to other domestic media. This may have provided a tantalising insight to the significance of the home computers emergence as a domestic medium at the expense of what seems to be a declining interest in other older more established media. Such an inclusion would have been worthwhile, although it would have added to the already large scope present in this text.

These criticisms are minor and the book does come highly recommended. It is well written throughout, clearly focussed and logically developed. It should be useful to anyone interested in empirical work on domestic computer use or the everyday emergence of new media, as well as those interested material culture. As with much audience research material, Lally confirms much of what we might have already suspected, as well as providing some unpredictable observations. This is a welcome addition to empirical literature concerned with the usages of information communication technologies, and should appeal to students and academics alike.

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