Review:

Wilson, Tony: *Understanding Media Users: From Theory to Practice*. Wiley-Blackwell (2009). ISBN 978-1-4051-5567-0, pp. 219

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Texts that carry pictures from a mobile-literate niece and are thus instantly familiar, calls that speak of 'strange voices' and unknown numbers and are therefore to be ignored, aren't by themselves exceptional instances of 'activity' which are astonishingly resistive or creative. Yet, this is what renders cellular technology varyingly meaningful. This is what Tony Wilson demonstrates in his book *Understanding Media Users*: interpretative practices run through everyday media use; and just as audience reception studies had once shown with screen and print texts, technologies too are unpacked, understood and appropriated, affordances are interpreted, always in context.

The storyline of audience reception studies is now many decades old, and as some would argue, older than the thirty years of its more frequently heard history (Livingstone 2006) that Wilson focuses on. Consequently, in addition to Wilson's thoughtful discussion on the struggles of audience reception against opposing schools of thought, there have been debates within the field itself, one of the most recent ones being around the utility of retaining the very terms *audience* and *reception* in the context of new interactive technologies (see Livingstone, 2004). So as one anticipates for instance that new textual genres are to emerge (Kress, 2009) how is one to know how these new genres necessitate new modes of interpretative engagement?

And to do this all, Tony Wilson's book carries the print and televisual audience across a range of media forms and genres, bringing to the book a perspective that absorbs the many different strands of research that have informed the body of audience reception studies. Rooted theoretically, like Wilson's earlier book 'The Playful Audience' (Wilson 2004) in reception aesthetics and phenomenology, it brings together reflections from reader-response, communication studies and cultural studies as it asks questions in and about 'media user

studies' (p4). Phrases such as 'media user theory' or 'active audience theory' surface time and again in the book, but one is often left asking oneself how much consensus there really is on what qualifies as 'active audience theory'.

As the book introduces accounts of *how* people work with contextual resources (and restraints) to interpret, evaluate and incorporate new media into their daily lives, Wilson is not alone in his concerns. The interaction of interpretative practices and contextual dynamics has been at the heart of many empirical projects with televisual audiences, and here too, as in other studies, semantic judgements and syntactic expectations are linked with culture and context. What Wilson seems to suggest in this book, is that at one level there are two kinds of cross-cutting anticipations at work in making sense of the media: the first is syntactic in nature and that these are genre-based, and the other is the experiencing of meanings, always routed through contextual complexities.

The book perhaps convinces its readers the most where it tries to bring diverse traditions together in developing a carefully constructed phenomenology of media use, in context. Cognitive theory enters an interesting conversation with literary hermeneutics. North American reader-response studies engages with Continental reception aesthetics in understanding television advertisements, in anticipating, appropriating and judging websites, tourist sites and telephone affordances. And as people act across the book, as readers, viewers, consumers and citizens, they are ludic in their interpretative work, but they aren't free; context provides resources as well as restraints.

And yet it is here, at its convincing best that the book leaves us asking for more.

Wilson successfully demonstrates how scholars of audience reception have all engaged with the question of what audiences do with texts, but little attention is drawn to where and why they disagreed. He outlines with strong arguments the fruitful ways in which Stan Fish and Wolfgang Iser can, in dialogue, contribute towards understanding the use of new media, and in reading, one wishes perhaps to be reminded of how they had disagreed intensely over Iser's heuristic of the *implied reader*, (see Iser, Holland et al. 1980 where Fish seems to ask for a more empirically grounded theory of implied users) a debate which could perhaps be productive for media user studies, especially in pinpointing how a considerable amount of research around hypertextual domains still continues to 'imply' and assume the role of the reader (and writer, today). Finally, while the empirical moments from real users are rich and informative, they are few and perhaps spread thin. This difficult task with contexts and culture is something that Wilson had managed well, with his earlier book (Wilson, 2004).

What is perhaps slightly surprising (though by no means unusual) about the way the book is structured is the position it takes at many points, but most perhaps in Chapter 1, about a very old split that runs through social science research, and indeed audience research. The

quantitative 'versus' qualitative position has seen tugs of war between apparently opposed paradigms of thought, and Wilson is far from alone in his firm opposition of the 'positivist' tradition, a tradition he calls influential but erroneous. In audience reception studies, undeniably much empirical work is located at the intersect of both approaches, because perhaps, "empirical data has some independence from its methodology and so can sometimes be valuable despite doubts about its methodology" (Livingstone 1998). Recently ethnographers have acknowledged the possibility of quantitative re-use of their data (Morley 2006); film audience scholars ask for more verifiable propositions (Barker 2006) and theoretical and empirical publications by audience scholars who work from a position of convergence, have long demonstrated the utility of triangulation.

While it seems certain that this is not a debate to be resolved easily, another split surfaces in this book. Linked to Wilson's criticism of quantitative studies is his determined criticism of the 'effects tradition' where he undoubtedly provides a thoughtful unpacking of the problems with laboratory based experimental effects research. Nevertheless, one wonders if there isn't more to 'media effects' than laboratory experiments. Is the best and most fruitful way to argue *for* Wilson's media users, to skirt the value of the questions that have been raised by what is perhaps a diverse and far from homogenous tradition of studying media effects?

Yet the book is strong in the way it brings together phenomenology to ludic media use. It is strong in its selection of empirical cases across a range of media, across a range of genres. It makes an admirable attempt to push forward the work that has been done by audience researchers, and it does this not only empirically but also theoretically. The book makes an innovative and imaginative attempt to write a pan media account.

Reading Wilson in Context: The Wider Renewal of Reception
In the last few years, there have been many individual and collaborative attempts to bring the insights of audience studies to the use of hypermedia and digital texts, but all media texts in general. And not all of this is available in English, much recent empirical work with media users resides in the language in which the reception theorists originally wrote, in German books and journals of media and communication studies (see Mikos 2001; Bucher and Barth 1998). And speaking of the intellectual repertoire offered by the text-reader hermeneutic moment, increasingly, literacies, especially in the context of media literacies, have been offered as a suitable framework within which to place the text-reader rapport in the age of creative interpretation. So, this book is best seen as an essential part of a wider renewal and re-imagination of cross-media reception studies, in which researchers writing in diverse languages, working across a range of media forms from tabloids to digital broadsheets, television to mobile technologies, have begun to contribute, even if the limits of the word 'reception' in interactive digital environments are too evident to be ignored.

In such a context Tony Wilson's task with this book, and with his earlier book *The Playful Audience* was to participate in a growing conversation in the field of audience studies with empirical contributions that re-imagine print derived conceptual categories in a trans-media context, but really ask where audience research is headed.

And in this book, this is a task he does well.

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