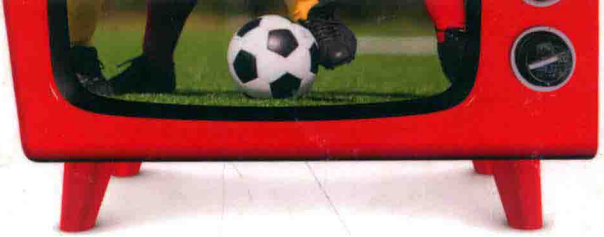

PADDY SCANNELL

Television and the meaning of *live*

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An enquiry into the human situation

Paddy Scannell

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At the heart of this book is the concept of the care structure – the hidden creative input that goes into the making of any thing, any human institution, event or practice. How could I not be aware, then, of this book's care structure – the unseen unacknowledged labour of its production, all that has gone into its realization? It is this, of course, that must be properly and appropriately recognized in the act of acknowledging. It is a rather awesome responsibility and duty. There is so much to recognize, so many to remember – all those, who, on the one hand contributed to what went into the writing of this book; all those who have contributed to its production as a book.

I have paid my dues already to some of those whose work informs this book in its predecessor, *Media and Communication*, which contains accounts of the writings of David Riesman, Erving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel, Harvey Sacks, J.L. Austin, Paul Grice, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson. Their thinking has been formative for mine in the drawn out process of writing its successor. The extent of my debt of gratitude to Martin Heidegger will become apparent in everything that follows.

There are two key topics to the second part of this book: the study of live talk and of live events. I have thanks to pay in relation to both. In the first case to my friends and colleagues in the Ross Priory Group who have contributed so much, through the years, to my understanding of the workings of talk on radio and television.[1] They include Andrew Tolson, Joanna Thornborrow, Stephanie Marriott, Kay Richardson, Ian Hutchby, Trudi Harman and especially Martin Montgomery who introduced me to socio-linguistics (and sailing). The groundbreaking study of media events by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz was the initial inspiration for this book. As always, I have learned a great deal from the teaching situation through the years. All the programs discussed in

part two have been used by me many times in the classroom. By dint of repeated viewings and discussions of them with students and colleagues, I have gradually come to see how they disclose the workings of live broadcasting and what is at stake in this.

On the production side, I must thank Andrea Drugan especially, my commissioning editor in Polity, and her colleagues Lauren Mulholland and Jonathan Skerrett. I confess I have lost track of all those colleagues whose friendship I have severely tested by asking them to read draft chapters at various points along the way. Rather than give offence to anyone by omission, I simply wish to thank them all – and especially the two reviewers for Polity who have read several iterations of the manuscript. Their patient advice and comments have been deeply helpful and taken into account. Dimitrios Pavlounis checked the references and compiled the bibliography, thereby sparing me a task I could hardly bring myself to do. Thanks, Dimitri – I could not have managed without your assistance. I have long ago acknowledged my debt to my wife and daughter, Suzi and Sonia, for their cheerful tolerance of 'the boringness of Heidegger'. For their continuing forbearance towards him and their loving support of me, I continue to be more grateful and thankful than I can possibly say.

Preface

I would like to think of this enquiry into radio and television as a contribution to what might be called third-generation media studies. It follows on directly from *Media and Communication* (Sage 2007) which was written as a textbook to introduce students to the academic study of media and communication. In my accounts there were two key moments: the formation of a sociology of mass communication at Columbia in the 1930s, and of media studies at Birmingham in the 1970s. The book's focus was *not* in the first place on media and communication but throughout on how academics engaged with and thought about the media and why. As I will shortly argue, academics go about their task by producing their object of enquiry as an academic object. But radio and television, the internet and mobile phones are simply *not* academic things – and in fact are resistant to being thought of as such. My aim and purpose here is an attempt to think of radio and television in their terms rather than in academic terms. This means to think of them *in situ*: as everyday worldly phenomena, as part and parcel of ordinary existence. In what follows, I set aside all *critical*, *theoretical* and *political* approaches in my enquiry into television as disclosive of the human situation today. In so doing I am, to put it another way, bracketing the discourses of sociology and cultural media studies – the first two generations of academic enquiry – of which I gave accounts in *Media and Communication*.

The provocation of this book is that it sets aside one of the most taken-for-granted, normal and normative assumptions of modern academic thought – namely, the explanatory power of sociology. I do so in order to resuscitate something that it has smothered out of existence and which yet underpins all its discourses. Anthony Giddens has argued, rightly I think, that sociology is perhaps *the* discipline of modernity: it is 'the most generalised type of reflection upon modern social life

[. . .] Modernity is itself deeply and intrinsically sociological' (Giddens 1991: 41, 43). We have all learnt to think sociologically. It has become a second nature to us. In today's common-sense self-understanding, human being is being social. This book is an enquiry into the meaning of the word 'life' and whatever that means it is surely something more than the *merely* social. Its problem, however, of which I am vividly aware, is that can no longer be taken as a *serious* question. It has dwindled to the status of an Oxbridge undergraduate joke (*Monty Python and the Meaning of Life*). The question of existence is, I have come to think, a limit question for the humanities and social sciences today, since it is nowhere recognized, acknowledged or addressed by them – in the fields in which I read, at least. The meaning of 'the social' marks the limits of their thinking and, by extension, the limits of modernity's self-understanding if (as I take it) that question is indeed modernity's ownmost topic and concern, as Anthony Giddens has argued. It is a foundational assumption of this book that what lies outside 'the social' (what determines it)[1] is 'existence'; life itself, life as such.

I begin with a sketch of phenomenology as an interdisciplinary way of thinking, and go on to a consideration of its distinctive, distinguishing topic, as worked out by Martin Heidegger, namely the question of existence, the meaning of (the word) 'life'. This was the focal concern of *Being and Time* (hereafter *BT*), one of the seminal texts of European thinking in the last century. But it was written nearly a hundred years ago, and the world today is not as it was when Heidegger published his life-defining work in 1927. If we are to benefit from its thinking, it must be re-thought in light of its relevance in and for our own times and this is what I try to do. I have undertaken a summary best reading of *Being and Time* which I hope is true to its central project, while critiquing it at certain points and trying to retrieve its integral unity. For it must be emphasized that it was hastily written (in order to get tenure!) and remains incomplete. In particular, it fails to deliver on what its title promises – namely a clear account of the relationship between the two components of its title – 'being' and 'time'.

The standard introduction to *BT*, in America especially, is *Being-in-the-world*, by Hubert Dreyfus. It was first published in 1991 and has since gone through dozens of reprints. By now it has become the classic *vade mecum* and guide to *BT* for English-speaking readers. Yet it is *only* about Division One, the first part of the book. Division Two is ignored. In his preface, Dreyfus tells us that he considers Division One to be 'the most original and important section of the work'. Division Two, he goes on, has two separate and somewhat independent themes. The first is the 'existentialist' topic of resolute, authentic being in face of existential anxiety, guilt and death. The second is the temporality of human

existence and of the world, in which Heidegger tries to retrieve an originary 'ecstatic' temporality that goes beyond time as succession (the movement from past to present to future). On this Dreyfus comments:

> Although the chapters on originary temporality are an essential part of Heidegger's project, his account leads him so far from the phenomenon of everyday temporality that I did not feel I could give a satisfactory interpretation of the material. Moreover, the whole of Division II seemed to me much less carefully worked out than Division I and, indeed, to have some errors so serious as to block any consistent reading. (Dreyfus 1991: viii)

I agree. Division One has an integral unity, a clear narrative direction to it and a remarkable focused intensity of purpose in pursuit of its goal – the truth of what it is to be, what in fact we are, namely human. It can be read as a stand-alone text, and in many ways it is. But it is incomplete. The topic of the book as a whole, as given in its title – Being *and Time* – simply has not yet appeared. Division One was intended as a preparation for that topic. It is a long time coming in Division Two, and by the time he gets there Heidegger has lost his way. The topic of temporality is not properly reconnected with the topics of Division One. But without it we cannot grasp the overall unity of the work. This can be summarily stated. It is a fundamental enquiry into the human situation.[2] It has three irreducible components: people, place and time. Division One explicates the first two topics (place and people) in preparation for the third: time, the 'lost' topic of Division Two.

Dreyfus unerringly identifies the great theme of Division One as being-in-the-world. This has two components. The first (and it is the key to everything that follows) is the being *of* the world: the ordinary everyday human world of material things, the immediate environment, the *umwelt* (the topic of place). This is explored in chapter three, the magnificent cornerstone of the whole of the first part of the book. It is followed immediately by the obvious next most relevant topic, namely the being *in* this ordinary everyday world of *ordinary everyday people* (the pivotal second component of the human situation). This, the topic of chapter four, is the crux of Division One, and it is at this point, as I will shortly argue, that Heidegger takes a wrong turn that distracts him from his overall project. Nevertheless, the first two components of the human situation are convincingly established in Division One; the being-there of the ordinary everyday world and the being-in-it of ordinary everyday human beings. But the project is radically incomplete without the absolutely crucial question of time. Being-in-(the time of)-the-world: *that* was the projected but not fully realized integral theme of Heidegger's exploration of the human situation and its inextricably connected elementary components – place, people, time *and in that order.*

The world of the 1920s, in Division One, is always the *umwelt*; the immediate environment in which any individual life is unavoidably situated. But nearly a century later the world today, for anyone living in a post-modern society, is both their own immediate environment (the place where they live) *and* the world-as-a-whole. This is the world as routinely and daily disclosed by all tele-technologies of communication and, centrally, I will argue, by the two key technologies of radio and television taken together under the rubric of broadcasting. As anyone at all familiar with Heidegger knows, he was, in his later years, much vexed by the question of technology and, as an aspect of his general distaste for its frenzied dominion, he was none too fond of either radio or television. Radio broadcasting, he declared in 1949, 'has interfered with the essence of the human' (Figal 2009: 278). As television spread through Germany in the next decade, Heidegger publicly deplored its impact on his fellow Germans while occasionally enjoying watching live TV coverage of soccer (of which he was passionately fond).

Human technologies are world disclosing. So Heidegger argued in his much discussed lecture on 'The question concerning technology', the first version of which was given in Bremen in 1949, in a country shattered and ruined by a worldwide war of its own making. What was that war if not the first total global war on land, sea and air in which technologies of mass destruction put to the slaughter over sixty million people. The apotheosis of all these technologies was the atomic bomb – modernity's technological sublime. It was with all this in mind that Heidegger thought and spoke of the question of technology.[3] But in our world today, technologies no longer appear as an overwhelming threat to human life as such. They are rather, in many respects, our essential everyday life support systems. It is another fundamental assumption of this book that we now live in a totally technologized world. To understand *our* 'conditions of existence' demands that we address the question of technology as constitutive of the world we live in.

Television is, like any complex technology, a continuously evolving, changing historical thing. When I began work on it back in the late 1970s, I thought of it in two related ways. There was the TV set in the living room, and what we (in Britain) watched on it – namely the BBC and ITV. It was natural for me to think of TV and radio as more or less synonymous with the BBC – with *British* television. It was the only television I knew (apart from American shows, restricted to no more than 15% of total output). Television was experienced, thought and studied at first within the frame of the nation-state. It is no longer possible to think within this frame. Today, we must think of television *as such*: not this or that television – American, British, Japanese or whatever – but simply, *television*. To be sure, when I try to show how it works, in what

follows, I take particular cases and these, naturally enough, turn out to be drawn from the televisions that I know – British and, to a lesser extent, American. But the programs I examine have no privileged status by virtue of their being American or British. When dinosaurs were first discovered, all over the world, they were not thought of as *American* or *British* dinosaurs when their remains were discovered in those places. Old programs, wherever they were made, are now part of the accumulating common global fossil record of broadcasting. What follows is an effort at re-thinking the initial terms in which I thought of radio and television as I encountered them back in the 1970s. Such an effort is a necessary response to two basic facts – one great, one small. The world has changed in the last 40 years – and so have I.

I began this book as a contribution to the study of media events, inspired by the seminal work of Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz. They understood media events within the frame of a Durkheimian sociology of ritual. I was particularly taken by their subtitle, 'The live broadcasting of history', and that was and remains a focal concern of the second half of *Television and the Meaning of 'Live'*. It is a study of what is at stake in live-to-air radio and television broadcasting. This is a rather peripheral topic in Media Studies as Jerome Bourdon (2000) has noted, and there is, at best, only a scattered literature on it.[4] It took quite some time for me to discover it as the crux of my own concerns in the two related topics of part two; talk on early radio and television and the coverage of media events and news. I gradually came to see them both as inseparable and basically to do with the *management of liveness*, more exactly the problems broadcasting unavoidably confronts in managing the immediate *now* of speech (talk) and action (events) in live-to-air transmission. On the one hand, there is the ever-present risk and danger of technical error and performance failure that is intrinsic to live situations in public; on the other hand, the potential triumph of what Hannah Arendt calls 'great deeds and words' in the unforgiving light of publicness. The breakthrough into what the book is now about came when I saw that these issues were in no way peculiar to broadcasting – that they are, in fact, the issues that all of us confront in the management of our own daily lives and concerns. The issues posed by live broadcasting, I began to think, tell us something of the nature of the everyday human situation that all of us are unavoidably in. I mean we, the living, who must always speak and act in the immediate now-of-concern in the course of an unfolding life. In so doing we confront the same possibilities and dilemmas – whether at the level of individual lives or of high politics – that broadcasters face anywhere in the world. There is no more guarantee of success for broadcasters in *any* live broadcast situation than there is for any of us in any real-time life situation in which we find ourselves – the

issues in both circumstances are the same. The question of the meaning of live broadcasting had grown into the meaning of life as we, the living, encounter it – and at this point I realized the book needed a complete rethink!

I therefore wrote what is now part one of the book as a preliminary exploration of the human life situation as we the living encounter it, in preparation for the study of the live situation in broadcasting as encountered by both parties to it – the broadcasters on the one hand, listeners and viewers on the other. Each part is, I hope, reciprocally illuminating of the other. Heidegger provided the essential framework of part one as the prelude to part two, but I had to wrestle him into shape. I have *re-thought* Heidegger in light of my concerns. Rooted out of my accounts are Heidegger's dubious notions in *Being and Time* on the masses (the They) and authenticity. His later jeremiads on technology are discarded, while hanging on to the key point that the essence of technology is nothing technological.[5] I have re-thought the question of being-in-the-world – the great theme of *Being and Time* – as being-(*alive and living*)-in-(*the time of*)-the-world. Unless the question of being is made fully explicit as being alive in time, there will always be the danger of lapsing into what Heidegger himself labels onto-theology, the cloudy realms of metaphysics. The underlying concern of *Being and Time* is one that I unreservedly share – to salvage and redeem the lost topic of existence, the meaning of 'life'. But to bring that question back to life requires tact in getting the balance and tone right, in raising the question again in an appropriate and timely way that makes it fresh and relevant to our world, our lives and our concerns today. This I have tried to do through an enquiry into live radio and television because that seems to me to be precisely the right way back to the question. Broadcasting is part of the taken for granted fabric of the world as a whole and speaks to the everyday life concerns of peoples situated in their own life world everywhere. In its management of live-to-air talk and events on radio and television, broadcasting unobtrusively reveals something of itself and of the world-historical situation of human life today, as I at last discover.

Contents

Part one

An introduction to the phenomenology of television

Prologue: Heidegger's teacup

By way of a beginning here are three stories about Heidegger and television. Martin Heidegger's life spanned most of the last century. He was born in Messkirch in 1889 and died in 1976. Messkirch, at the time of Heidegger's birth, was a village with a population of around 2,000, situated in south-west Germany, just north of Lake Constance and the Swiss border. He grew up in a deeply rural, traditional Catholic environment; his father was a craftsman, a master cooper and the sexton of the parish church. His mother's family were small tenant farmers.[1] In 1961, Messkirch celebrated the 700th anniversary of its founding and it invited its most famous son, the now world renowned philosopher, Martin Heidegger, to join in the festivities and give a talk.

Heidegger's talk, appropriately enough, was on the meaning of 'home', and, he remarked, coming home to Messkirch today, the first thing one notices is the forest of television and radio aerials on every roof-top. He saw in this a potent symbol of what the future held in store for Messkirch and the world. The TV aerials showed that human beings were, strictly speaking, no longer 'at home' where, seen from outside, they lived. The people of Messkirch might be sitting in their living room, but really, thanks to television, they were in the sports stadium or on a safari or being a bystander at a gunfight in the Old West (Pattison 2000: 59–60). The 71-year-old Heidegger was deeply suspicious of the intrusive, alien presence of television in people's homes.[2] It was part of the domination of mankind by modern technology.

That is the first story. Here is the second. Heidegger, for sure, did not have a television set. And yet, in his later years, he would regularly go to a friend's house to watch television. All his life Heidegger had been a keen sportsman. He was an excellent skier and would head for the snow-covered slopes whenever he could in the winter. He had always been fond of football and in his youth he was, Safranski tells us, a useful

performer on the left wing. In his later years he became an enthusiastic follower of the European Cup on television and, 'during one legendary match between Hamburg and Barcelona, he knocked over a teacup in his excitement' (Safranski 1998: 428). This match took place in the 1960–61 season, the same year in which Heidegger gave his talk in Messkirch.[3]

And lastly, another football story – as told in English by Friedrich Kittler before an English audience.[4] Heidegger is now an old man in his eighties and his death is less than two years away.

> Back in 1974 when Germany's football team won the title of World Champion – for the second time – the philosopher Martin Heidegger happened to take a train from Heidelberg back to Freiberg [. . .] and since in city trains at that time there were dining cars Germany's greatest thinker had the chance to make the acquaintance of Freiberg's theatre director:
>
> 'Why didn't we meet before?' was the director's urgent first question. 'Why don't you ever show up at the dramatic performances I give?'
>
> Heidegger's answer was simple:
>
> 'Because on your stage they're just actors whom I'm not at all interested to see.'
>
> 'But dear Professor, I beg you, what else could we in the theatre possibly do?'
>
> 'I'd rather like seeing and hearing not actors but heroes and gods.'
>
> 'Impossible. Heroes don't exist and gods even less.'
>
> 'So haven't you watched our recent world championship on TV? Although at home my wife Elfride and I don't have one, I visited some nearby friends in order to watch. And for me the most obvious thing to remark was the fact that Franz Beckenbauer, the hero of the German team, was never fouled or wounded – he's proven to be invincible and immortal. Now you can see, even amongst us, there are heroes and gods!'

What do these stories tell us? Like any good tale they point to a moral which I take to be something about academics and how they think as academics on the one hand, and how they act when, on the other hand, they stop being academic. In his public role of mystic sage, Heidegger deplores television. When he gets home and hangs up his professional hat, he becomes ordinary like the rest of us, and does what the rest of us do ordinarily. He watches television and is absorbed by it. What needs serious consideration is not what Heidegger *thought* about television, but what happened to him when he watched it. Heidegger's spilt teacup is what calls for explanation. How could he be so excited? By the end of this book I hope to have offered some answers to that particular question. Here at the beginning I want to note the problems of academic thinking, particularly when it engages with the ordinary world of everyday life which for all of us today includes something that we speak and think of as 'television'.