

Beyond the heuristic of suspicion: the value of media literacy

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Introduction: histories of media education in the UK

A backward glance at the construction of media education in the English curriculum reveals four patterns which make useful starting points for a consideration of what is happening now, and what might develop in the future.

These four patterns follow a common theme set by the first pattern, in which media education has been imagined as what I will call a ‘heuristic of suspicion’. It has been the ill-tempered police officer of meaning, pushing teachers and students into a paranoid scrutiny of newspapers and television programmes to detect bias, misrepresentation, and other distortions of some imagined ‘truth’. Behind this uncongenial figure lies a tangled history of protectionist impulses, clearly identified by David Buckingham (2003). Buckingham points to the well-known influence of Leavis (Leavis & Thompson, 1933), whose approach to media education he characterises as cultural protectionism: an effort to protect children from the debasing effects of the mass media. He also identifies the no less rigorous efforts of Marxist ideology theorists to protect young people from the ideological effects of the media by teaching them strategies of interrogation intended to unmask the ideologies of the dominant groups in society and the media industries – strategies which, while their political intention might have been the polar opposite of Leavis’s, look remarkably similar in their form and joyless denial of pleasure. The third form of protectionism Buckingham notes is moral protectionism, again based in reading strategies of suspicion, this time to expose the supposed immorality of media representations of, in particular, sex and violence. While this impulse is considerably stronger in the US than in the UK (or indeed European media education in general), it is nevertheless a factor in the institutional regulation of media texts for young people, and in the value systems sometimes applied by fundamentalist religious groups to schools’ choice of texts.

The second pattern discernible in curricular constructions of media in English is that it is often imagined as a genre of factual representation and communication: essentially, news media. It’s as if the entire function of narrative texts and imaginative fiction is reserved for Literature. Two histories are noteworthy here. One, again, may be Leavis, whose critical readings of media texts for school students never embraced the narrative structures of comic-strips or the poetics of film, but rather made advertising their object of attack (Leavis notoriously invented many of the advertising texts he used, the better to exemplify their debased nature). The other history helps to explain how, regrettably, media literacy is again, at the present time, being seen as a matter of how citizens retrieve and critically appraise factual information. This is the history of the computer. As Lev Manovich has memorably described, the computer, from its inception in the form of Babbage’s Analytical Engine in the 1830s, has developed as a processor of information, in contrast to the history of photography (also beginning in the 1830s with Daguerre’s Daguerrotype), which is a history of cultural representations (Manovich, 1998). As these two technologies have become fused in the multimedia computer, what we may be seeing is the difficulty of ICT educators in understanding how the number-cruncher has become a tool of cultural production; while media and English teachers struggle with the implications of the cultural representations which have been their traditional stock-in-trade – films, poems, stories – becoming computable. It is partly for this reason that computer games, a cultural form which has always by definition been a set of computable representations, poses such interesting and challenging

questions for media and English teachers as they consider how to teach such a form in the classroom (a question to which I will return below).

In the wider world of policy, politicians and bureaucrats have continued to be trapped by this division of ‘media’ into, effectively, fictions on the one hand and factual information on the other. In Europe at least, the ‘fictions’ have been largely the interest of film educators, who have considered how cinema narratives can be critically explored in schools in much the same appreciative mode as literature teachers deploy in their approach to literary fictions. Meanwhile, the policy-makers have been largely preoccupied with how information is conveyed to citizens through electronic media, particularly online. In the UK, where the promotion of media literacy is a designated responsibility of the super-regulator OFCOM, this kind of literacy is seen mainly as a set of competences in handling factual information delivered by the internet: how to access it, retrieve relevant information, be critically aware of its provenance and trustworthiness, adapt it for whatever purposes might be important to the user.

So, the general effect of this fact/fiction divide in the educational and policy arenas is to overemphasise both the importance and the risks of factual information in young people’s lives, and to almost completely neglect the most important uses they actually make of the media: the music, dreams, fantasies, play, dramatic narratives, whimsical performances, album-making, aspirational self-representation, parodic invention and casual communication which make up most of their online lives.

The third pattern of the ‘heuristic of suspicion’ in the English curriculum is that it represents, essentially, an act of critical *reading*. Media within English has been located within the reading section of the curriculum, with no equivalent provision made in the writing section. In England, then, it has been mandatory since the inception of the National Curriculum to teach children to *read* the media (that is, critically interrogate it), but not to *write* it (that is, produce their own media texts) (QCA, 2007). There is a doubly suspicious stance here: a suspicion, again, of media texts, positioning them as objects of a critical gaze quite different from that envisaged for literature; but also a suspicion of young people’s own media production work, implicitly devalued by comparison with creative writing. There have been, indeed, criticisms of student media productions within the media education community, castigating it as incompetent and derivative, reproducing the very ideologies that teachers seek to expose (see Buckingham 2003 for an extended account of this). But such pessimistic attitudes have largely been replaced in more recent years by positive accounts of the value of production work, based in rationales of conceptual learning, creative transformation, and cultural practices of media production increasingly typical of young people’s informal media cultures (Potter, 2005, Jenkins, 2006, McDougall, 2006).

Finally, successive versions of the English curriculum have demonstrated a suspicion of semiotic modes beyond language. Recent versions recognise the growing argument for a multimodal approach to textuality and literacy (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2000; Jewitt and Kress, 2003); but the occasional reference to multimodal texts arguably produces only internal contradictions within what is effectively a conservative ringfencing of language, buttressed by an increasingly unconvincing argument for its superiority over communicative modes. This argument takes curious turns. In 2004-5 a ‘conversation’ was held with stakeholders by the agency responsible for curriculum development over the period of New Labour’s terms of office, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, about the future of the English curriculum. In its response document, the QCA argued, in reply to a number of submissions making the case for a version of the curriculum incorporating contemporary media texts, that:

Alongside views that media and screen-based texts [can] have their place in English 21 there is the caveat that these should never be at the expense of our rich book-based literary heritage – a point more fully elaborated in terms of the purpose and value of engaging with verbal language: *the study of literature has one conspicuous advantage over the study of film and television media, in that it develops the skills of analysis, argument and discourse alongside language skills.* (QCA, 2005; emphasis added)

This kind of argument can be seen as a diluted residue of the Leavisian attack on popular culture. The authors of the curriculum here display a softened stance on the teaching of texts such as comics, films and television, allowing them a place as part of a wider cultural landscape: but there remains the firm belief that they need to be treated suspiciously, and to be seen as somehow thinner, more insubstantial, less nourishing than literature.

My intention here is to oppose this view, by argument and example. The argument is that there is no logical reason why the study of comicstrip and animated film should not develop ‘the skills of analysis, argument and discourse alongside language skills’ just as effectively as the study of literature.

What, then, might the traditions, practices and theories of media education have to offer an English curriculum that might move it away from these limitations and distortions? I will frame my suggestions within the so-called 3-Cs model of media literacy. These ‘C’s also inform the most recent version of the English framework in England; but the cultural, critical and creative elements there carry different meanings from those which inform media education. My proposals will build on a model developed in 2007 with James Durran (Burn and Durran, 2007), as part of an account of a decade of media education in the first specialist Media Arts college in England.

Culture: rethinking the divisions

The real debate about culture in the English curriculum is the tension between what the Cox Report labelled cultural heritage and cultural analysis. There is no explicit reference to this debate, however, in the curriculum. Culture there seems to mean ‘multicultural’, which, while it is a worthy aspiration to widen the selection of literature included in the curriculum, fails to account for the distinction between the literary canon and the popular cultural affiliations and experience of many of our students. How, then, might we re-think this distinction, and make something productive of the tensions that still exist?

My suggestion is to return to the definitions of culture offered by the influential cultural theorist Raymond Williams, whose work triggered the birth of Cultural Studies in Britain. Williams proposed three ‘levels’ of culture: the ‘selective tradition’; the ‘documentary tradition’; and the ‘lived culture’ (Williams 1961). It was the third level, the proposal of a ‘common culture’ grounded in the everyday cultural practices of working-class people, which inspired Cultural Studies’ subsequent attention to the politics of the popular, the structures of youth cultures, and the importance of audiences in the determination of meaning and value. The emphasis on lived culture remains a strength of media education, and no-one would dispute its importance. Nevertheless, Cultural Studies (and media education) have largely ignored William’s other two cultural levels. What would it mean to revisit them? Perhaps the first thing to say is that an attention to the ‘selective tradition’ need *not* represent a return to the narrow focus on heritage literature. Rather, the ‘selective tradition’ implies a critical focus on the mechanisms by which certain texts are privileged, conserved, sedimented into lasting traditions. This kind of critical attention to the social processes which determine (and contest) cultural

value are surely the kind of processes which we would expect our students to learn to understand, and indeed to participate in.

Cultural value is a difficult area for media educators and for English teachers. Both are locked into forms of cultural distinction which they must defend, yet are unable to fully acknowledge or explain. The resistance of media teachers to the traditional values of *élite* culture is admirable, and the championing of popular culture in a curriculum which has little room for such material must be sustained. But it is absurd to be boxed into a position which is unable to recognise the intrinsic value of texts beyond the popular domain; or to consider the tastes and judgments which recognise (perhaps even construct) such value. Furthermore, it is clear that the texts of popular culture frequently undergo a revaluation by successive generations: yesterday's trash B-movie becomes today's cult classic; the arcade games of the 1970s are curated for exhibition in *élite* galleries; the pulp comicstrips of the twentieth century acquire both economic and cultural value as the collectors' items of today.

But something similar happens in the construction of a literary canon. Through what processes of critical commentary, hagiography and 'bardolatry' was Shakespeare elevated into national poet? How are the popular oral cultures of mediaeval England conserved and instituted by the academy as valued literary works? How does the development of the European novel separate out 'literary fiction' from what becomes dismissively known as 'genre fiction'? How could a value judgment settle the score between the work of Isaac Asimov and William Golding? Philip K Dick and George Orwell? Philip Pullman and J K Rowling? Emily Bronte and Catherine Cookson? Interestingly, the spurious work of cultural distinction continues from these literary sheep and goats into successive media adaptations. Orwell's work produces the art-house films of *1984* and *Animal Farm*; Philip K Dick's stories morph into sci-fi classics starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Harrison Ford, popular blockbusters which nevertheless trouble easy distinctions between popular and art-house cinema; J K Rowling's stories become Warner box office triumphs and computer games, while Philip Pullman's are first adapted for the stage of the National Theatre (though subsequently into film and computer game). These processes of evaluation, exercises of taste, histories of shifting judgments usually appear in the classroom as inscrutable features of culture. Arguably, however, English and media teachers have a role, to open up these processes to scrutiny, beginning with a sensitive recognition of the cultural histories of the students themselves.

Williams' second category, the documentary tradition, suggests how culture at one level is a residue of a society which no longer exists; his examples are the art, literature and architecture of the ancient world. In media education, there is very little history, but rather a persistent focus on the new, which the advent of digital media and, recently, the participatory internet, has intensified into an obsessive neophilia. Williams' concern for cultural history reminds us that a proper interest in the contemporary moment can be balanced with an interest in the archaeologies of media texts, institutions and audiences. In one school where I am currently conducting research, for example, media teachers are helping students to explore the history of the camera from the camera obscura to the production of personal image-banks typical of modern digital cameras, mobile phones and online image-sharing communities.

English, by contrast, is very much preoccupied with literary history; though not necessarily in the way Williams imagines in his notion of the documentary record. The emphases are sometimes on the development of formal aesthetic features of literary texts, and on celebratory accounts of the lives of writers. However, something approaching an interest in literature as a documentary record of significant world events (the War poets, for example), social conditions (Dickens' reportage and

social critique, perhaps), and the minutiae of social convention (Jane Austen; Swift; Chaucer) can also often be the focus.

So we can see that, in both English and media classrooms, cultural dispositions and cultural capital are both imported into school from children's prior experience, and either legitimised or sidelined. The ideal might be that we build on these experiences, both valuing them and extending them into new areas. It is clear also that this is by no means an unconscious or purely instinctive process. Rather, it is a critical process, in which students become aware of cultural provenances, of the collision and negotiation of cultural tastes typical of human society, and of the aesthetic properties of material media. The critical aspect of this process is the subject of the next section.

Critical literacy: rhetoric and poetics

Media education has always been a form of critical practice, as in the forms of 'critical literacy' propounded today, which encourage students to question 'who constructs the texts whose representations are dominant in a particular culture at a particular time; how readers come to be complicit with the persuasive ideologies of texts; whose interests would be served by such representations and such readings ...' (Morgan 1997).

This is a strength of media education. It can be seen as a rhetorical tradition, beginning with Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and developing into the rhetorical studies of the modern day, which critically analyse political messages and the persuasive techniques they employ. For Aristotle, the art of rhetoric fell into three categories: *ethos* (the ethical context, emphasising the intentions of the speaker); *logos* (the substance of the spoken text); and *pathos* (the emotional engagement of the audience). I mention these ancient categories because they are still with us. The production regime in which a media text is generated, the structures of the text itself, and the reception regime in which audiences engage with the text – these three categories are fundamental to contemporary conceptions of the cultural exchange of meanings in Cultural Studies (du Gay, Hall et al. 1997). They are also fundamental to the conceptual framework employed by media educators: the bedrock of the critical understanding students are expected to acquire.

There is a history of unease among media educators, however, about what happens when this critical approach becomes isolated from the pleasures of engaging with the media or the creative enjoyment of media production. At the level of public examinations in the UK (at GCSE and A Level), conceptual and critical understanding is often assessed through written essays which analyse media texts or evaluate the students' own production work. It is all too easy for such work to become a decontextualised, dutiful rehearsal of what the student imagines the teacher or examiner wants to hear (Buckingham, Sefton-Green & Fraser, 2000). Part of the solution to this problem has often been seen as a closer integration between creative work and critical understanding. In the following example, for instance, 12-year-old students making a video game are asked to imagine themselves as games journalists writing a review of their own game:

Saturday 25th March, 2006.

Kids Make Their Own Game!

Students in Year 8 at Parkside Community College in Cambridge have formed a games company named PIG productions, in order to create a spectacular adventure game with an

impeccable plot. PIG is an acronym for Parkside Interactive Games, and PIG's first game is currently in the making, by the name of Jimmy De Mora and the Dying World. Using Mission-Maker and just under 30 creative minds, students work in one of the English rooms at their school to design and make the game. . . .

The game is scheduled for release at all good game stores from May 2006, as the final touches are currently being made to the game. Lucky people who have had the opportunity to preview the game have never given it less than 4 stars, mainly for the plot.

The game follows secret agent Jimmy De Mora, who is living in a world that is deteriorating thanks to global warming, and is suddenly faced with the kidnapping of his daughter and sister. He has to rescue many prisoners, including much of his family, and seek a holy artefact for renewable energy. Some say the game is a cry for attention to the melting polar ice-caps, some say it's an exaggerated joke. Whatever is said, we can't wait to see how the final release is seen by the gaming world!

While this is a relatively light-hearted example, the students have been encouraged to consider various aspects of the games industry (studio production; game magazines; games retail outlets); game audiences; and the political message of the game itself, as well as the possibility of different audience interpretations. This has been accomplished in the form of a written role-play, integrated into a suite of activities around the game production (writing walk-throughs; designing posters and game-box covers; designing and producing the game itself with an authoring software package), rather than an abstract activity divorced from the creative context.

Another example from classroom practice which demonstrates the importance of teaching and learning about media institutions, is a Year 8 lesson taught by James Durran of Parkside Community College, Cambridge. As well as its use in developing critical understandings of media institutions, it demonstrates how and why the same concepts can be applied to literary texts. It consists of an analysis of the game-box cover of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (Electronic Arts, 2002). First of all, this cover represents the media institutions involved in developing the Harry Potter franchise across different media, mainly by the inclusion of company logos. There are:

EA – Electronic Arts, the games giant which publishes the game, and controls its production by a separate development company, KnowWonder, whose logo also appears

WB – Warner Brothers, who own the rights to the Harry Potter franchise, and make the films

ELSPA – the Entertainments Leisure Software Publishers Association – the UK umbrella organisation for the games industry, who have here applied the European industry's self-regulating age advice labelling scheme – in this case, giving the game a 3+ rating.

Inside the box and on the CD-ROM are other logos, representing institutions as different as The Times Education Supplement, which reviewed the game, and Dolby Sound, whose licensed technology produced the sound track of both game and film.

A critical reading of these logos by students, then, can show that texts such as Harry Potter do not exist in a vacuum, but are subject to a complex political economy. Global reach can only be achieved through the involvement of multinational companies such as Warner and EA; but such companies may also exert forms of control over content which smaller 'independent' companies may seek to resist. Games and films are subject to forms of regulation controlling the relation between their

content and the age of their audience, with the mediating role of parents playing a role in the considerations here. Such forms of regulation are themselves a matter of social and political debate, involving (in this and similar instances), national regulators, the industry itself, parental groups and European and national politicians. The consumption of games is mediated by processes of review, both online by players and in more traditional forms of journalistic review. And finally, the textual structures of games, from their programmed narratives and play sequences to the sound they incorporate, are partly determined by specific technologies, each with their own history of development.

However, it is not only computer games that depend on this complex institutional involvement. The lesson that media education can offer English in this respect is that all texts have some kind of institutional context. There is very little history of attention to such contexts in the traditional pedagogies of English; though only a little reflection is needed to suggest its importance. The ability of technologies to make new meanings and social practices possible is evident from Caxton's press to today's social networking; the power of publishers over the utterances of authors was as evident to Thomas Chatterton and Dickens as it is to JK Rowling; the power of patronage may have passed, in the time between Shakespeare's work and Simon Armitage's, from monarchy and aristocracy to corporate and civic institution, but it still exists.

The other two key areas of critical understanding relate to text (Aristotle's *logos*), which I'll return to in the next section; and audience. Again, media education has a robust tradition of critical attention to the nature of media audiences. While various versions of English promote the idea of writing for a 'real audience', the idea of actually studying audience behaviours, the social processes of textual reception and use, and the nature of interpretive communities rarely appears. Again, this kind of critical understanding is something media educators can bring to the table. It enable us to ask important questions. How do readers, spectators, players choose which texts to read, watch, play? What kinds of taste regimes operate; and are they influenced by peers, by families, by school, or indeed by the forms of comment and critique now evident in online social networks? What kinds of uses are texts put to? Do they function as 'cultural capital'? As mechanisms of pleasure? As philosophical stimuli? As catharsis? Political exchange? Expressions of conformity or dissent? Rehearsals for future life? Workshops for social dilemmas?

All the above questions and themes fall under the heading of the rhetorical aspect of critical literacy – and it is here that the traditions of media education are stronger than those of English, and able to robustly equip the literacy ship, as it were. I want to turn now to an aspect of critical literacy where English has the better-developed tradition – the poetics of textuality.

The media education approach to textuality has essentially been a semiotic one. Rooted in adaptations of sixties and seventies structuralist semiotics and narratology, most conspicuously those of the early Barthes, it has paid little attention to textual aesthetics. By contrast, English has always operated within an aesthetic tradition that can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, particularly in its conceptions of the formal properties of narrative structure, of tragic and comic drama, and of poetic metaphor and prosody. While English teachers know that such structures are only of interest in the service of meaning, it seems likely that one regrettable effect of the National Curriculum has been to reduce the teaching of literary texts again to decontextualised and fragmented fixations with such structures. Nevertheless, my point here is that the rhetorical and poetic aspects of critical literacy belong together. The problem has been that media education has been better at the former, English at the latter; and they need to come together.

What might this look like in practice? The following example will serve to develop a little further what I mean by a poetics of the media, and the aesthetic aspect of media texts. As with the Harry Potter example, the text in question is both a literacy and a media text, so also serves as an example of the necessary entanglement of the two traditions for which I am arguing. The activity can be seen as a form of ‘reverse-engineering’: using an authoring technology to literally undo the fabric and structure of a filmic text to see how it is made. In this case, the video editing software Adobe Premiere is used to disassemble fragments of Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*, to explore how particular aesthetic effects are achieved. Furthermore, students are encouraged to creatively remake sections of the film, experimenting with different shot sequences and soundtracks. Before they begin the work, they work with the teacher to consider the function of different filmic structures: figure 5 shows an exploration of different camera angles and shots, for example.

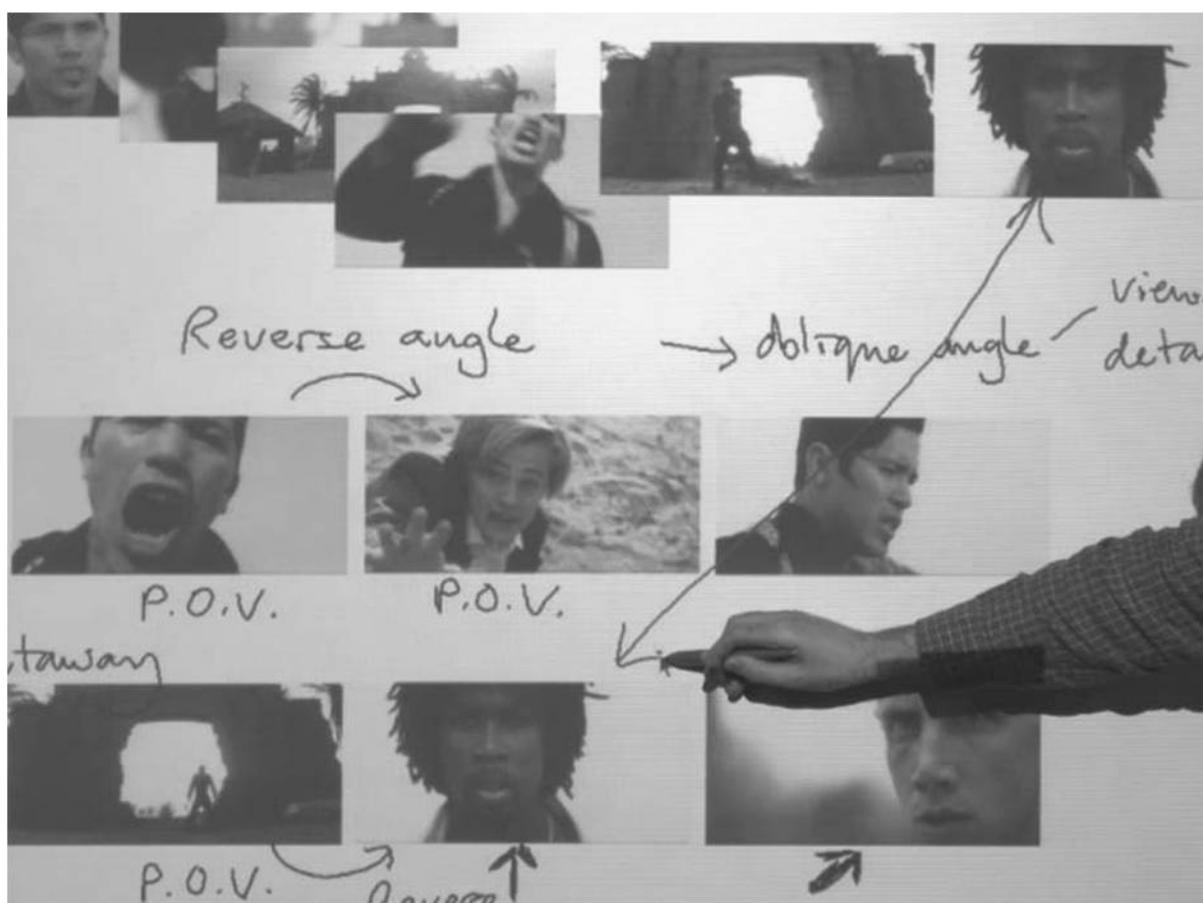


Figure 1: Whiteboard notations of different shot types, preparing students to create new film sequences using material from Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*.

While on the one hand, this kind of activity forms part of the conceptual framework of media education (understanding the ‘language’ of media texts), it is also a consideration of the aesthetic properties of the text. Aesthetic judgment, in the sense developed by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1985), is an expression of socially determined cultural taste, and this politics of culture is central to the work of media educators, who must conduct the negotiation of taste and judgment in their classrooms, encouraging students to reflect consciously on how such tastes are formed – a delicate and difficult business, as anyone who has worked with students to make music videos based on their own musical preferences will know. In the case of this filmic re-making, however, the focus is more closely on how particular aesthetic choices can be made using the materials of the text, and what the effects of

these will be. This is closer to Aristotle's original notion of *aisthesis* as sense-perception than it is to the rarefied forms of aesthetic judgment characteristic of heritage literature or arts education. One student remarks, for instance, how he has learned:

. . . the use of being able to cut from shot to shot, instead of being, like, in a theatre and watching the whole thing on one screen constantly . . . how you can create emotions using particular techniques.

Another has learned to recognise montage – the juxtaposition of disparate images to make new meanings:

When you did it yourself, you could see so many things that you could do with it, that you wouldn't have thought of doing . . . if you'd seen a picture of a clock, you wouldn't have put it maybe with, like, the police car, but when you can see it, and you can dissolve it into each other . . . and you can see it and how it changes it, how it makes it more interesting or do different things. . . .

And another has found, through practical experiment, how the temporality of film can be stretched or elided:

I don't think I shall be able to go to the cinema, or watch another movie, without thinking about all the different shots and sounds in a small scene again . . . I found the idea that you could make a shot with the camera much longer or shorter, or faster or slower . . . fascinating and clever. I thought the shot was however long you filmed it with the camera for.

Another student considers the narrative function of the camera as an eye, a proxy for a witness in the narrative, or for the spectator:

Also, at that point when the camera tracks up, it is the first time there has been any significant movement in it. the camera has stayed still to reflect the movement of the most important character in the sequence: like Mercutio, the camera has witnessed everything, but has done nothing about it . . . The final shot is of a new character to the sequence: Samson. The camera is placed at an oblique angle to him. He is not an important character, he is at the side of the action. His emotion, his expression of fear and anxiety, needs to be acknowledged—not felt—by the audience. He simply watches—he does not act.

This kind of critical work, a fluid mix of technical production, aesthetic choices and critical reflection, is close to the kind of work student might undertake in painting pictures, choreographing dance, directing drama, writing poetry. It is situated in a 'media arts' model of media education; it exemplifies the kind of thing I am thinking of as a 'poetics' of media education. However, it would be a mistake to think that a poetics of this kind can float free from the political considerations of rhetoric: the two need to inform each other, as I have already argued.

Finally, these examples demonstrate a growing awareness of the 'grammar' of the moving image: how particular camera movements or edited sequences produce meaning as well as the particular images they shape. The value for students of understanding language grammar has much debated in the history of English teaching; a recent book takes the arguments forward, considering how concepts of linguistic structure can be extended to wider semiotic frameworks, how they can be responsive to context and culture, and how they can be applied across different modes and media (Locke, 2010). There is no room to rehearse the arguments here; rather, I will outline briefly my own assumptions,

derived from my classroom practice as a former teacher, and from my own research over the last decade or so.

Firstly, the evidence seems to suggest that a conceptual grasp of the semiotic structures underlying a text is useful, if not necessary. Students can reach sophisticated understandings of texts without a technical understanding of its structure; and can, by the same token, make sophisticated texts of their own without such an understanding. But, if it can be achieved without slipping into empty formalism, decontextualised exercises, and laborious naming of parts, it can aid analysis and creative production. This applies to the visual grammar (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) of comicstrips and graphic novels, the 'kineikonic' grammar of the moving image (Burn & Parker, 2003), and the ludic grammar of computer games (Burn, 2010), as much as it does to the grammar of language.

Secondly, to explore the structures of meaning across a range of media forms such as these promises a richer, more complex, more robust understanding. A good recent example is a secondary Head of English who looks across book, film and game to enable his Year 8 students to gain a more sophisticated understanding of point of view and systems of address in narrative fiction (Partington, 2010).

Thirdly, an understanding of textual structures – the mechanisms which serve both the rhetorical and poetic functions of books, poems, polemic tracts, films, television dramas, comics or roleplaying games – needs to grow out of students' creative production of their own texts as well as analysis of other people's. One advantage of the re-making of *Romeo + Juliet* is that the students' grasp of dramatic gesture, character function, montage and camera movement is coming *both* from an analytical look at Luhrmann's text *and* the production of their own edited sequences. It is this essential link that recent versions of the National Curriculum framework for English fail to provide for. They go some way towards recognising the need for students to learn to *read* multimodal texts ("understand how meaning is created through the combination of words, images and sounds in multimodal texts", QCA, 2007); but the section of the framework which specifies what textual production is required refers only to *writing*. It remains mandatory, then, as I noted earlier, for students in England to study multimodal texts, but not to produce their own.

These examples suggest, then, that to be most effective, critical understanding needs to be integrated with creative production. But what exactly do we mean by creativity? How does it function as an aspect of media literacy? How might it represent common ground between media education and English?

Creativity: imagination, rational thought, and textual production

Creativity in education is a much-debated idea. It is very differently conceived, not only by different academic traditions such as those of cognitive psychology, sociology, or philosophy; but also by different stakeholders such as teachers, artists, workshop leaders, government think-tanks and policy-makers (Banaji & Burn, 2007).

My preferred approach to creativity draws on the work of the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, for whom the creativity of children was closely related to play (Vygotsky 1931/1998). Vygotsky shows how children learn through play the meaning of symbolic substitution through imaginative treatment of physical objects, such as a child using a broomstick as an imaginary horse. These symbolic understandings become internalised and develop into the mental processes of creative

thought. Vygotsky's argument is, however, that true creativity only develops when the imaginative transformations of play are connected with rational thought.

Here's an example. Figure 2 shows a comicstrip superhero designed by a 12-year-old girl. It comes from a series of lessons in which students critically explore the idea of superheroes: what social and cultural meanings they carry; how the 'grammar' of their design works; what kinds of narrative surround them. Having learned to analyse commercial comics, the students are then asked to design their own superhero comic front cover. This character, Tigerwoman, has been chosen by its author to shift the gendered balance of the traditional superhero pantheon, producing a representation of powerful femininity. In this respect, it adopts traditional motifs of superhero iconography: the costumes, masks, urban scenarios, subordinate police forces, moonlit landscapes typical of the visual narratives of DC and Marvel comics, and of the animated and live action film and television spinoff franchises. In Vygotsky's terms, then, this girl has playfully adopted a range of cultural resources, and worked with what Vygotsky calls 'semiotic tools' to transform them into something new, something she has imagined. 'Semiotic tools' would here include not only the physical materials (paper, felt-tip pens), but also the visual 'lexis' and grammar she has deployed. At the same time, rational processes of representation can be seen: the gendered representation referred to above; and a causal narrative thread running through the visual composition. In these respects, this can be seen as a creative piece of work in Vygotsky's terms, a piece of work involving imaginative transformation and critical thought.

However, it can also be seen in terms of the cultural aspect of media literacy. The drawing makes considered, critical, pleasurable use of the resources of popular culture, partly in the service of an egalitarian message. Furthermore, the cultural work of the image can be related to the girl's own social identity. What it means to be female, to be a girl moving into womanhood, is a concrete, personal affair as well as a generalized political statement. The signifiers of femininity most salient to 'tween' girls are produced by this girl as attributes of her imaginary characters: painted nails, exposed midriffs, eye makeup, figure-hugging costumes. While she has not, in fact, experimented with these aspects of tweenhood, she cannot but be aware of other girls in her class who have. The possible routes through girlhood here are laden with moral and sexual ambivalence, opening up different routes to adulthood, but also to risk and name-calling.

Creativity, then, whether it is seen in poetry-writing, comic-book design, filming and editing, or game production, is not a mysterious force of the Romantic imagination. Rather, it is a specific synthesis of thought and imagination, oscillating between the mind of the individual learner and the social context of the learning. Creative students imagine something new: but they use existing cultural resources, and they craft the imaginings according to a rational design. The teacher's job is to provide the resources and tools and to guide the process. Tools may here include material tools, whether they be felt-tips, cameras or digital authoring softwares; but they will also include semiotic tools such as concepts of narrative or textual structure. Resources will include experience of other texts which have gone before, setting up the dialogic chain imagined by Bakhtin between the new utterance and the 'already-known, already-uttered' (Bakhtin, 1952/1981). They will also include some sense of who the new text is for – its audience. And the teacher needs to provide a sense of the contemporary moment – how this new text fits into the discursive landscape. Students bring a strong sense of this from their own experiences of literature and the media; but this sense needs to be recognised and made visible in the classroom. To hermetically seal creative production from the social contexts which inform it and can receive it makes no sense. At the same time, dialogism implies both an immersion in the contemporary moment, and a distance from it. The awareness of the utterances which go before produces a historical perspective; an ability to live in the cultural moment and stand outside it, looking

at it from the point of view of earlier decades, societies, generations, the point of view implied by Raymond Williams' documentary level of culture. It is this kind of multidimensional creativity, criticality, cultural awareness that the model of literacy outlined in the final section attempts to provide.



Figure 2: *A 12-year-old girl's superhero design*

Towards a cultural-semiotic model of literacy

The 3-Cs model of media literacy, then, suggests the need for media educators to interweave the cultural dispositions of their students with an expanding exploration of new cultural territory, in the context of playful, imaginative, creative production work. The balance is important, and is laid out in the 'cultural-semiotic' model of media literacy I developed some years ago with James Durran (Burn and Durran, 2007), whose classroom work is represented in the examples used in this chapter. This model (Figure 3) connects Williams' three levels of

culture, shown on the left), the popular 3-Cs structure (here conceived of as the social functions of media literacy) shown in the centre; and the semiotic work of media discourses, design, production and interpretation, derived from the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (2000), shown on the right.

It proposes, then, that media educators and English teachers move beyond a preoccupation with the contemporary moment of lived culture, though always returning to this moment as the space where meaning is made in the social realm for our students: where values are chosen, identities forged, pleasures enjoyed, representations understood. But at the same time, the contemporary moment is enriched by an interrogation of the past: of the cultures of parents and grandparents, of media texts re-valued through retro-culture, of the archaeology of media, the history of cinema, the origins of the camera, the birth and adolescence of video-games.

The model proposes, as I have argued above, that the critical aspect of media literacy consists partly of the rhetorical analysis of media texts, institutions and audiences. On the one hand, this implies a critical distance from the lived culture; for students to explore the lived pleasures of popular culture, but at the same time stand outside it, historicize it, imagine it from other points of view, move beyond their own cultural values to explore those of other groups, other times, other generations. On the other hand, it implies critical understandings of the mechanics of rhetoric: of the grammatical devices of persuasion and argument, the syntax of ideology. In this respect, it connects with the semiotic model on the right of the diagram. It proposes that, in order to achieve this critique, students need to understand the semiotic modes chosen in the process of design, the technologies of inscription deployed in the material construction of media texts, and the modes and media of distribution which bring these texts to their audiences.

At the same time, the model requires the poetics of the media I have explored in this chapter. This stance of appreciation aims to help students to connect the aesthetic forms of the media, on the one hand, with their social meanings (the rhetorics); and on the other hand with their technologies of representation (the semiotics). It asks students to consider how the grammars of visual design, the moving image, computer game design, create these social meanings and the affective charge which invariably accompanies them. It asks them to analyse how these meanings and emotions are bound up in particular stylistic markers; and how these relate to their own aesthetic preferences and cultural values, as well as those of others.

Finally, the creative function of media literacy represents how the creative act connects also in two dimensions. It is indissolubly linked with the critical function (indeed, the production of new media texts can be the best way for students to grasp the rhetorics and poetics of the media); it is the means for the expression of aesthetic taste and for the self-representations through which social roles and identity are explored.

In the horizontal dimension, it represents the students' entry into the world of cultural production: a dialogic relation to the archaeology of past media texts, an interrogation of the selective tradition, an intervention in lived culture. Meanwhile, in relation to the semiotic

dimension, creative production operates as an apprenticeship in the practical semiotics of the media: it enacts the critical understanding of textual structure and design, and the social interest invested in these structures.

<i>MEDIA LITERACY: A CULTURAL-SEMIOTIC MODEL</i>		
CULTURAL CONTEXTS	SOCIAL FUNCTIONS	SEMIOTIC PROCESSES
LIVED	CULTURAL	DISCOURSE
SELECTIVE	CREATIVE	DESIGN/PRODUCTION
RECORDED	CRITICAL (rhetorical and poetic)	DISTRIBUTION INTERPRETATION

Figure 3: a cultural-semiotic model of media literacy

Conclusion: beyond the old divides

English and Media Education belong together. They need each other – they serve as correctives to each other’s prejudices, restrictions of scope, intellectual limitations. The examples and model offered in this chapter are intended to move beyond the sterile polarities constructed by mandatory curricula in the UK, to move beyond the opposed stances of suspicion and reverence applied respectively to media texts and literary texts. Literature is out of its jacket, marked with the signs of its economic and material production, bleeding into other media, subject to the online transformations of fans able to rewrite the hallowed word with no respect for textual boundaries. Conversely, films, television drama, comic-books and computer games have grown their own respectable histories, canons and heroic author-figures. They are collected, revered, curated, acknowledged by the institutions of high art which once reserved their attention for the traditional elite arts. In this world of cultural reversals, English and media teachers owe it to their students to make common cause: to embrace models of literacy which collapse the boundaries of elite and popular culture, of today’s and yesterday’s cultural moment, of the meaning and structure of texts, of the lexico-grammar of language and the equivalent structures in other media. Nothing will be lost, and there is much to gain.

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