

SIX ARGUMENTS FOR THE MEDIA ARTS – SCREEN EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

This is a summary version of Andrew Burn’s Professorial Inaugural Lecture, given at the Institute of Education on April 21st, 2013.

At a time when arts education is again marginalised in school curricula, the media arts are most in danger of being lost. This article proposes six reasons why schools and policy-makers should take the media arts more seriously. It argues for collaboration between the arts, proposing that in today’s world a fusion of artistic practices is more common than a separation between them; and challenges the hierarchy of the arts which operates in society and in education. Finally, it identifies the specific role of digital media in the media arts, arguing for both continuity and innovation.

The debate about the value and danger of the arts in society is an ancient one, and can be traced from Plato and Aristotle to today. The former Merton professor of English at Oxford, John Carey, wrote a book a while ago called *What Good are the Arts*, taking as its starting point a robust critique of the usual aesthetic, ethical and humanist arguments. We can apply the same question to the arts in education, asking if they are serious or trivial? Work or play? Fiction or reality? Ethical or amoral? Childish or adult? Anarchic or civilising? Purposeful or pointless?

But my job here isn’t to make a wholesale intervention in the defence of the arts debate in general. Rather, it’s to identify the specific value of the media arts in the early twenty-first century; and even more specifically, how they might form part of the project of education.

I have six proposals to make.

1. CROSSING CULTURAL DIVIDES 1: THE IMPORTANCE OF POPULAR CULTURE

The first is about the nature of culture. Cultural distinctions have been with us at least since the Enlightenment, and forms of popular culture have thrived in all ages: we can trace their histories from folksong and story, chapbooks, broadside ballads, Victorian melodrama, penny dreadful and music hall to the popular musics of the twentieth century, the horror films of 1930s Universal studios and the Hammer studio of the sixties and seventies, the horror comics of the fifties, to *Grand Theft Auto* and *Silent Hill*, the literature of Stephen King and J K Rowling, and George R R Martin.

In the critical project of the arts curriculum, the case for taking popular culture seriously is most effectively made by media educators, in HE and schools. It is informed by Raymond Williams' powerful vision of a common culture, a lived culture, in which the daily practices of working class families deserved to be taken as seriously as those of the opera-going class.

However, it's become more complicated, in two senses. Firstly, the postmodern hypothesis, whatever its excesses, pessimisms and misplaced suspicion of depthlessness in culture, productively proposed a collapsing of the formerly well-policed boundaries between high art and popular culture. This collapse is, of course, itself ambiguous, as those boundaries are still policed quite effectively. Nevertheless, where the boundaries crumble we can see real opportunities for education. Where the art of Shakespeare meets the MTV aesthetic in Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, for example, we find unlikely aesthetic conjunctions and abrupt meetings of taste communities that would once have had nothing to do with one another. Indeed, I can remember teaching *Romeo and Juliet* to a very reluctant 13 year old school refuser for whom the merging of the figure of Romeo and Leonardo di Caprio was a particular kind of magic.

Secondly, there is the shift of emphasis from media audiences to audiences and producers, which we'll see examples of later. This is the culture which John Potter has referred to as 'the new curatorship': how we now collect, archive, and create media as records, representations, interpretations, exhibitions of our lives.

When we take these ideas together – the value of popular culture, the blurring boundaries in late modernity between high and popular cultural forms, and the attention to popular culture typical of media education – how do they all sit in relation to education and its ways of dealing with culture?

If culture is, as Raymond Williams famously said, one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language, then it is unsurprising that its presence in education should be unclear, opaque, and contradictory.

In the English National Curriculum, it's hard to find any clear sense of what culture has meant. Broadly speaking, it has generally referred to two things: multiculturalism and heritage culture. The recent Henley review commissioned by the DFE and the DCMS had a stab at explaining it, illustrating it, even prescribing it. Here what emerged was a hierarchy of the arts. At the top of the heap was music and art, reinforcing their already elevated status as national curriculum subjects. Next came dance and drama, currently subsumed under, respectively, PE and English. Henley recommended they become subjects in their own right – a recommendation kicked into touch by the government. Next came the one concession to media education: film education, which reflected the successful lobbying of BFI education and the BFI's lottery distribution role. Although Henley's pitch here was for cinema as heritage culture, rather than as popular culture (and, again, my argument is that the

two are best promoted together rather than as polarised opposites), this was a step forward, and was also distinguished by an attention to the making of film by young people as well as viewing and critical appreciation. However, the scandal of Henley was its complete omission of any mention of media education more broadly conceived, or of media studies, despite its palpable success in terms of takeup at GCSE and A level, in terms of its long history of catering for the cultural interests of generations of young people, and in terms of its distinguished record in the UK, admired around the world, but repeatedly snubbed by successive British governments and sections of the media.

Education in new screen media, then, has the potential to pay proper attention to popular culture, to explore cultural taste and value, and to productively erode old polarities between elite and popular cultures.

CROSSING CULTURAL DIVIDES 2: CULTURAL HISTORIES

My second argument for the value of new screen media education is the sense in which cultural boundaries across time can be crossed through new screen media. The argument here resists the idea that contemporary popular culture is a culture of rupture – that the new screen media of computer games, music video and CGI action films violently break with the past and with what Matthew Arnold famously (or notoriously) described as ‘the best that has been thought and said’.

This argument runs as follows. Firstly, the structures, imagery, rhythms, narratives of contemporary screen culture are more firmly rooted in older, even ancient traditions than we might realise. The origins of the three-minute pop song in Dowland and Schubert is one line that can be traced, though I won’t attempt it. I’m a little more secure with computer games, where the formulaic structures of adventure games or Role-playing games in which you, as protagonist, face a series of ever-more powerful end of level boss monsters have as their predecessor oral narratives like the Iliad or Beowulf. Indeed, Beowulf has now been made into an animated film and subsequently a videogame in which you successively battle Grendel, Grendel’s mother and finally the dragon.

The argument here, then, is that games provide a particular kind of cultural continuity, recalling older, more ancient forms of narrative, even reconstituting something of the sensibility of oral cultures – a version of what the scholar of oral culture Walter Ong called ‘secondary orality’.

Why is this a good thing? Well, if there is a consensus in education for the inclusion of heritage culture, these examples suggest that games, while being the newest media form, can also “do” heritage: reach back into traditions of narrative that predate modern distinctions of taste, revive the vitality of those narratives and their vivid, visceral representations of perennial human concerns. Nobody would argue with a class’s simple enjoyment of a good book, musical composition, watercolour, piece of theatre. The same argument has been effectively made for watching

film, and considerable sums of money have been spent promoting this in recent years. Why not, by extension, promote playing a videogame as a collective class experience? One of my earliest research efforts in this field, in fact, ten years ago, was to study the year 7 class of my colleague James Durran, playing the videogame of Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, and noting not only the intense collective pleasure in this experience of fiction but also the potential for critical interpretation by the class, of the meaning of Harry Potter and his world, the narrative structures of the game by comparison with the book and film, and the critical interrogation of the media industries behind the franchise, through, for example, the text and logos on the game box.

And, to return to the heritage argument, if the Harry Potter books produce interesting questions about meaning and narrative when adapted into videogame format, what would happen if we did the same thing to a Shakespeare play? My argument is that it would produce a new kind of Shakespeare, familiar to a 21st century audience but perhaps incomprehensible to earlier generations of Shakespeare readers and theatre-goers. But, on the contrary, it might also make possible a different reading of Shakespeare: one that emphasised ludic qualities already present in the texts. Some examples: the magic wood, potions, identity-swapping and win-lose outcomes of *A Midsummer Nights' Dream*. The conditional logic of Hamlet's progress – if it's my father's ghost I'll revenge it; if it's a demon from hell, I'll repel it; if I kill Claudius at prayer, he'll go to heaven, if I kill him with his sins upon his head, he'll go to hell; if I kill myself, I lose these burdens; if not I face up to my responsibilities. The moment at the end of the *Tempest* when Prospero turns to the audience and tells them that they decide whether he remains on the island or gets to Naples. This is the second-person mode of address characteristic of videogames.

Figure 1 shows a screengrab from a game of *Macbeth* made by two 13-year-old girls from Coleridge Community College in Cambridge. They made them on our game-authoring software Missionmaker (now owned by the London Knowledge), in partnership with Shakespeare's Globe.

Rather surprisingly, however, the students didn't always focus on the blood. One pair chose to use the sewer corridors in the software to represent the Sewers of Lady Macbeth's Mind – an elaborate visual metaphor.

We also created a game economy tool. The software already had three economies – health, strength and hunger, so that students designing games could programme these to respond to events they created. We decided just to take off the labels, so that the students could call these economies anything they liked, and they called them things like bloodthirstiness, ambition, conscience, and programmed them to rise or fall depending on Macbeth's decisions.

Figure 1

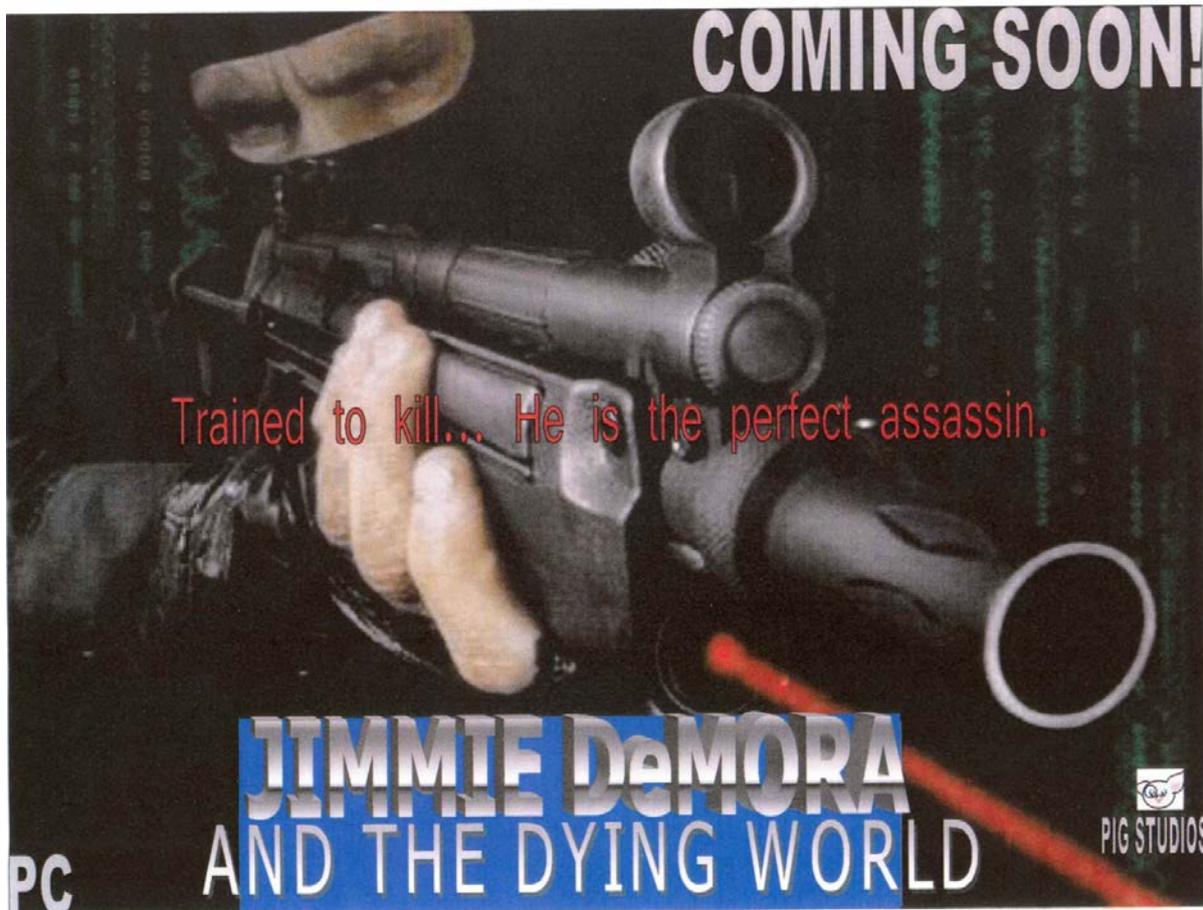


I hope, then, that this works as an example of my argument: that screen media like games might develop new kinds of communicative and creative skills in students, and represent new digital cultures; but also connect with older cultural forms, and allow us to see them in new ways. The videogame industry has barely exploited the back catalogue of English literature, in the way that Japanese games have built on samurai legend and Shinto and Buddhist myth: perhaps the English classroom can show the way.

3. THE NEW RHETORIC

The arts are generally good at attending to creativity and aesthetic form. The media arts have traditionally been better at critical interrogation of various kinds. In another game-making project, for example, we asked Year 8 students to invent a game company for their game, to think about who might contribute to the game, to think about how to market it, who would review it, and who would buy and play it. Figure 2 shows the poster they made to advertise the game.

Figure 2



These critical explorations of who lies behind media texts, of the political economy which frames their production, of the audience pleasures, tastes and engagement which responds to them, isn't often found elsewhere in Arts education. This kind of work can be seen as the rhetorical aspect of the media arts in schools. Aristotle's model of rhetoric involved three artistic proofs or modes of persuasion: the *ethos* - or knowledge, authority and persuasive stance of the speaker, the *logos* – the words – and the *pathos*, the emotional appeal to the audience. The rhetorics of media education are not dissimilar: the political economy of the speaker or producer; the logos of the media text; the pathos of the audience's engagement. This has always been a strength of media education, and it's something the other arts are moving towards, and represents the kind of critical awareness we imagine as an indispensable attribute of the modern citizen.

4 THE NEW POETICS

However, the media arts are not only a tool to promote critical thinking. They also have an aesthetic function, like all the arts – indeed, like any designed object or performance. What might this be? What is distinctive about the aesthetics of digital screen media?

We can return, again, to Aristotle, for whom the word 'aisthesis' meant sense perception, and argue that screen media are multisensory forms, engaging us

through different senses, provoking embodied responses. If we think of young people making their own media texts, we realise that these forms of embodiment are complex, as I'll argue in the next section.

But we also realise that narratives, messages, rhetorical gestures can only be conveyed by beautiful design. Just as we can teach, as English teachers, how to shape a narrative or structure a poem, or as drama teachers how to convey a dramatic image through body and speech, so we can work with young people to shape a camera shot, refine an edited sequence of film, build an elegant sequence of objectives, obstacles and rewards in a game. My preferred metaphor for this new poetics is an old image: the rhapsody. On the one hand, it conveys the poetic intensity of a creative work, the profound commitment required both to make it and to hear, watch, or play it. On the other hand, as Walter Ong again reminds us, the word originates with the Greek verb *rhapsoidein*, which literally meant to stitch – as in the oral poet's stitching together songs. So it implies a unity of different art forms – literature, drama, music, performance – the passion of performer and audience; and the work of stitching together a text, which describes very well the process of digital editing of video, or the construction of rules which govern events in a computer game.

An important point to make is that this argument and the previous one are two sides of the same coin. There can be no poetics without meaning; and no rhetorics without poetic form.

Finally, however, we know from the sociology of cultural taste that absolute perfection of form is a pointless goal. We need to think how cultural tastes are shaped by social experience, in our families, schools and peer groups, which commentariat we read, and how the cool and uncool, kitsch and elevated, beautiful and sublime are at least partly determined by social context, by time and place, class and choice, friend and foe.

One of the values of pushing Metaphysical poetry into juxtaposition with hip-hop, or Shakespeare into collision with computer games, is to open up the complexity of cultural taste across time, space and social difference. We can't possibly resolve different tastes in schools, or offer easy answers – the best we can hope to do is to open up to scrutiny, debate, and perhaps best of all, diverse creative practice, the regimes of cultural taste that we bring with our curriculum and heritage texts, and that students bring from their own lives, families, friendship groups.

5. MULTIMODALITY, CROSS-ARTS WORK AND THE INSIDE-OUT CURRICULUM

So to my next argument. There's a perennial struggle in the arts between purity and promiscuity – to keep painting, or music, or drama, or poetry, or film ring-fenced, or to allow them to merge, overlap, converge. Again, I think we can have the best of both worlds here. Of course we need teachers, academics and practitioners who

specialise - who have deep knowledge of these domains of knowledge, and know how to convey and develop these understandings with students at whatever level. But the challenge of multimodality – as a fact of the world and as a theory – is to realise also that the actual artistic and communicative practices of the world don't respect boundaries – and that in the digital age we're more likely to see what Henry Jenkins calls convergence culture, or what we popularly know as remix and mashup. Take film as an example: from the first creative explosion of filmmaking, the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein argued in his montage theory that film radically juxtaposed images through editing; but also through the actor's changes of expression and gesture, and through the combination of image, speech, sound and music. A recent example in my own research is a film by a Year 7 group, from the same school as the one who made the Shakespeare game. The film is machinima – the new form of animation which grew out of videogames – and it's made on the 3-D animation software Moviestorm, as part of a collaboration with the British Film Institute and the University of Leeds, funded by First Light.

In order to make the film, the children developed their own narrative. They then split into different groups to make assets for the film itself. One group were speech-actors, and recorded the dialogue. One designed the characters (Figure 4): their faces, costumes, expressions, hair. One designed sets – the landscapes, buildings, vegetation, skies, fire, objects. And the fourth composed, played and recorded the music.

They then reformed into editing pairs, and each pair was responsible for editing a short sequence for the final film. Here, they placed the characters in the sets, animated them, added the dialogue, and crafted the moving image grammar of shot distance, angle, duration and order.



Figure 4: character design for a machinima film

There are various arguments about multimodality here. What I want to emphasise are three things. Firstly, screen media have always been multimodal forms, and they incorporate other, older forms of artistic work: among them the poetics and rhetorics of speech, visual design, dramatic action, music, architecture. Secondly, they make cultural connections – here, between the hundred-year-old culture of cinema and the more recent popular cultural form of videogames. Thirdly, this kind of project exemplifies the value of specialist skills and domains of knowledge on

the one hand – musicians, film-makers, English teachers, ICT specialists, media educators – but also the need for these to work together to produce the kind of media we're used to seeing on our screens today – our TV screens, our cinema screens, our game consoles, our mobile phones. In this respect, we can make two arguments. One is about the need for cross-arts collaboration. We can specialise, but ultimately we need to collaborate and learn to speak each other's languages. The other is about curriculum design, and the need to break out of subject-silos into inter-disciplinary spaces.

6. FROM STEM TO STEAM TO STAMMP: DIGITAL CULTURES AND PRACTICES

When my last school, Parkside Community College, became the country's first media arts college in 1997, something odd happened. It was our moment of entry into the world of the digital arts. Previously we had used an analogue video editing system which many media teachers may remember fondly! In the summer of 97, we bought three high-spec Macs and the professional non-linear editing system Media 100. For many years we used this successfully, and learned a good deal about moving images literacies in the digital age.

What was strange, however, was that the Head of ICT in the school wouldn't go near the Macs and the editing software. Instead, he lived in his rival world of PCs and Microsoft office, which occupied a good deal of the ICT curriculum. It's easy enough, with hindsight, to condemn that kind of curriculum, and the current wholesale rejection of it in the UK is the final expression of this condemnation.

But I think something else was going on, in this sudden collision of media teachers and ICT teachers. Lev Manovich, in his classic book *The Language of New Media*, tells a compelling story of the parallel histories of two technologies, both beginning in the 1830s. One begins with Babbage's proposal for the Analytical Engine, the ancestor of the computer as an information processor. The other begins with Daguerre's Daguerrotype, the ancestor of the camera as the basis of representational technologies over the next two centuries. Manovich's argument is that there are two parallel layers: the computer layer and the culture layer, which eventually come together in today's multimedia computer. That, I think, was the moment when our Macs arrived, and it was a moment of mutual incomprehension. The Head of ICT had no way to understand what it meant for information processors to become instruments of cultural production. But at the same time, we media teachers had no way to understand what it meant for the hundred-year-old language of film to have become computable.

Fast forward to today. It seems to me that we are still in danger of falling into this divide; and it's a version of C P Snow's famous *Two Cultures of the Arts*.

Ian Livingstone, life president of Eidos-Square Enix, and adviser to the government on the need for programming in schools, makes the case powerfully in his next Gen

report for NESTA that we won't have a videogames industry in the future if we don't teach children proper programming: to learn to make digital products rather than just to use them. But he also recognises the importance of connecting programming with the arts, and his formulation of it is the increasingly-popular acronym STEAM – to put the Arts into STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths. My comment would be that this is a step in the right direction, but it doesn't go far enough to address Snow's original profound critique – it treats the Arts as a minor player, a supplement to the formidable ranks of the 'serious' disciplines.

My proposal, then, is a new acronym to right the balance: STAMMP. Science, Technology, Arts, Maths, Media and Performance. If you look at Livingstone's companies, Eidos and Square Enix, and the collaboration of disciplines they use to produce Final Fantasy or Tomb Raider, that's what you have: computer science, software engineering, 3-D animation, speech acting, storytelling, music composition. It's the industry equivalent of the Year 7 group whose work we saw earlier. And an example of how, in the world of screen media, science and the arts go hand in hand, as they could do in the curriculum.

CONCLUSION: MARTINI MEDIA AND A BRAVE NEW WORLD.

My argument, then, has been partly a defence on screen media education as a good in its own right. It is distinctive in its embrace of popular culture while extending across the whole range of cultural taste and value. It is distinctive in its critical approach to contemporary media arts and communicative forms, offering a way to reinstate the rhetorical element of the liberal arts as they were constituted in antiquity and in the Renaissance. It is distinctive in its rich combination of signifying systems, media and cultural traditions, offering opportunities for cross-arts collaboration which prepare students better for the way the arts work in society. And it is distinctive in being the art of the machine, both of the analogue age and the digital age, offering a bridge across the divide which CP Snow described, and which still threatens our culture and our education today. Perhaps a final point to make might be the mobility that screen media offers to the artist – the ability to edit pictures or video, notate, record and multitrack music, sketch graphic designs all on a smart-phone in interstitial moments – standing on station platforms at Kings Cross, sitting on the Tube, waiting in a shopping queue, sitting through a bit of downtime in a meeting. This is the Martini model of digital arts production – anytime, any place, anywhere. But though there will be a new mobility, flexibility, adaptability; there will still be a need for studio-based work, professional environments, and training. As with the bridge between popular culture and high culture, between the individual arts and the convergence culture, between curricular specialism and crossover, between serious programming and playful application, we can have our cake and eat it. But that's not to dilute the argument for the centrality of screen media in our arts and education. It's taken 100 years to get film education even to the margins of the curriculum. Let's not take another 100 years to get the newer artforms of videogames to the same place.

