

# Popular culture and media education: The British experience

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## Introduction

Within the field of Cultural Studies there has been much recent debate on the role played by popular culture (popular music, film, television etc.) in modern industrial society (Eagleton, 1992; Modleski, 1986; Root, 1986; Williamson, 1986; Gray, 1987). There are pessimists and optimists. The former further divide into humanists and Marxists. The humanists, perhaps best characterised by the works of F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, are dismayed at the increasing 'media onslaught' and hold little hope that the masses will ever be able to extricate themselves from this cultural mediocrity and engage in serious artistic contemplation. Marxists, with theoretical roots in the work of the Frankfurt School intellectuals, argue that because popular culture is created and disseminated by the 'culture industries', they carry meanings supportive of the economic and social status quo (characterised by class, gender, race, age and other inequalities). Mass culture thus helps reconcile its consumers to the status quo, so serving the interests of capitalism.

As Modleski (1986) points out, these two versions have not been that dissimilar. While their political motives might differ, both have shared a faith in the importance of great art, which they value for being all that mass art is not.

What further unites these theorists is a reliance on the hypodermic needle model of the media which suggests a mainly passive audience absorbing what is transmitted to them by broadcasters (Morley, 1980).



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Opposed to the pessimism of these two positions is one that, in shifting attention away from texts to audiences, has come to celebrate popular culture. Largely championed by theorists who place themselves politically on the left, this view holds that far from being the purveyors of hegemonic ideologies, popular cultural forms ironically provide the resources for cultural resistance to the status quo (see, for example Fiske, 1989, 1992).

How does this debate connect with media education? As I will demonstrate with reference to the British experience, where one locates oneself in this debate ultimately determines ones ap-

proach to media education. The history of media education in Britain, since its inception in the 1930s to the present, has in fact reflected these changing theoretical assumptions concerning the relationship between the media and society. In this paper I focus on these British developments and debates, rather than on specific South African initiatives in media education. I do so in the belief that these debates have relevance for our own teaching practice. At the very least, a knowledge of these debates should prevent an unnecessary repeat of the intellectual journey which, in Britain, began over fifty years ago.

### Media education as 'Discrimination'

In supporting the inclusion of the study of the media in the English syllabus as from 1993 at standards 5, 6 and 7, the South African Department of Education and Culture (1989:17) made the following observations in their working document: "TV, video and films play a significant part in our culture. Teachers need to develop in pupils a discerning, discriminating approach to viewing, essential skills need to be developed to make them aware of the processes that *manipulate* the *unsuspecting viewer*" (my emphasis).

Similarly, a recent survey of Transvaal schools teaching visual literacy reported that one of the central reasons given by schools for introducing film studies was "to enable the pupils to interpret the bombardment of the visual media and to alert them to the manipulative powers of these media ... [and] to foster critical attitudes towards visual media in pupils in order for them to view selectively and to cultivate critical faculties" (Ballot, 1993:170).

So expressed, the key objectives in a media education programme becomes the training of 'discrimination' and 'appreciation'. These, in fact, were the twin

Leavisite themes which dominated British media education discourse for almost 50 years from its inception in the 1930s to the early 1980s. The above-quoted sentiments are obviously oblivious to the fact that the debate has since moved on.

That the notion of 'discrimination' had dominated the field of British media education for so long was an indication of the extent to which this tradition, with its antipathy towards the mass media, constituted the 'common sense' thinking in the area. Itself an out-growth of the nineteenth century mass culture critics' despair at the role the media were playing in the dissolution of organic pre-capitalist society, it harnessed these concerns into a campaigning educational politics (Masterman, 1988).

The Leavisite approach to media education has its roots in the 1930s with the publication, by Leavis and Thompson, of *Culture and Environment*. Their pre-occupation with pre-capitalist social formations and culture led them to dismiss all those cultural forms which have their basis in modern technology. As Anderson (1969) has pointed out, for Leavis the organic community of the past, when there was no division between the popular and the sophisticated, died with the Augustan age. Thereafter, in Leavis's view, history traced a gradual decline, and with the industrial revolution, the old rural culture was finally swamped. But, it did not initially undermine the existence of a cultivated and elite minority, the creators of literary culture. This culture was, however, undermined by the wave of twentieth century industrialisation. The new communications media were, according to Leavis, part of this onslaught threatening to obliterate cultural standards. For Leavis then, the duty of the literary critic was to fight against this degeneration of cultural

standards by the new media (Anderson, 1969:271).

*Culture and Environment* argued for the extension of this vanguard role to (English) schoolteachers in containing the encroaching cultural barbarism. As the authors argued in their introduction:

We cannot, as we might in a healthy culture, leave the citizen to be formed unconsciously by his environment. If anything like a worthy idea of satisfactory living is to be saved, he must be trained to discriminate and resist (Leavis and Thompson, 1977:4).

This antipathy towards the media was again clearly expressed almost thirty years later in Thompson's *Discrimination and Popular Culture*:

Everything learned at school in the way of aesthetic and moral training is contradicted and attacked by the entertainment industry. The aim of schools is to provide children with standards against which the offerings of the mass media will appear cut down to size (Thompson, 1964:20).

The introduction of popular cultural forms into the classroom was essential if students were to be inoculated from their harmful effects. Ironically, then, the first impetus towards media education in Britain arose from an hostility towards the modern media.

However, even more problematic was the methodological premise of such a programme. An approach which has as its central tenets 'discrimination' and 'appreciation' is dependent on the subjective response of the critic/teacher for knowledge production. So, according to Leavis, the critic does not judge a work by an external philosophical norm. Rather he/she achieves a "complete internal possession" of a work and then fits it into his/her assessment of other works. Thus his whole oeuvre rested

on a metaphysics which he could never expand, defend or justify.

We have entered the realm of taste, which according to Bourdieu (1980:11) is "one of the most vital stakes in the struggles fought in the field of the dominant class and the field of cultural production". As he clearly demonstrates, there is a clear connection between class position and taste. In the name of great works of art and literature this connection is hidden which is why Bourdieu (1980:11) states that, "Here [in the realm of taste] the sociologist finds himself in the area *par excellence* of the denial of the social".

In practice this Leavisite approach ran into obvious problems. Where class, ethnic and age differences often divide teacher and pupils there was no guarantee of a shared response to the media under discussion. In fact, Murdock and Phelps (1973), in their survey of media use in British classrooms, found that because of class difference many teachers had only a limited knowledge and experience of those sectors of the mass media which their pupils were exposed to and enjoyed. One consequence of this was that:

Teachers appeared to opt for those sectors of the mass media generally classified as highbrow and consequently avoided those sectors usually categorised as purely 'entertainment for the masses' (Murdock and Phelps, 1973:13).

Writing a decade earlier, a British media studies teacher highlighted this same dilemma when dealing with television education. He ruefully noted that it was amongst "this great mass of relatively worthless material" that many children's favourite programmes are to be found. This, he pointed out, creates a dilemma for the teacher, for:

He cannot hope to succeed if he begins with an outright condemnation of his students' tastes, for he must appear before them as one whose task is to increase their enjoyment of television. Full and frank discussion of programmes ... demands a close and sympathetic relationship between teacher and student. On the other hand, the teacher cannot pretend to share young people's enjoyment of certain programmes (Higgins, 1966:10).

Even the more progressive Popular Arts Movement, which influenced much mainstream media education practice in Britain in the 1960s, remained wedded to the notion of 'discrimination'. The seminal text was Hall and Whannel's *The Popular Arts* published in 1964. Faced with the sheer pervasiveness of youth cultural forms in the 1950s and 1960s the authors argued that a defensive rearguard action against popular cultural forms was no longer tenable. Instead of discrimination *against* the media they proposed discrimination *within* the media. As they pointed out in the book's introduction:

In terms of actual quality ... the struggle between what is good and worthwhile and what is shoddy and debased is not a struggle against modern forms of communication, but a conflict within these media ... Our concern is with the difficulty which most of us experience in distinguishing the one from the other (Hall and Whannel, 1964:15).

The authors' commitment to the 'politics of taste' was again evidenced when they admitted the difficulty of distinguishing "what is really new and original" from the "meretricious", the "real lines of continuity in culture" from

"so many ersatz offerings", the "serious intellectual work" from "mere shifts in taste and fashion" (Hall and Whannel, 1964:22).

In a 1975 editorial, *Screen*, a British journal aimed at bringing together media theorists and media educators, both succinctly stated the problems with such an approach to media education and pointed the way forward for further developments in the field:

... unless one assumes a complete aesthetic sense innately present in the child, the irrational character of the notion of response will mean that an unarguable taste is being transferred from teacher to student in a process dependent on the teacher's authority and the ideological formation that confirms it. The existence of some more objective knowledge of the subject ... provides the student with another authority to turn against that of the teacher (Collins, 1981:15).

It was, in fact, this turn to more 'objective knowledge' which characterised the next major theoretical shift in British media education.

### **From Discrimination to Mediation**

In the 1980s there was a significant shift away from 'discrimination' and 'appreciation' as key objectives in media education. This involved a shift away from aesthetic and moral questions towards more 'scientific' and 'technical' ones in an attempt to demonstrate the political effectivity of the media in cementing social formations riven by class, gender, race and other inequalities (Masterman, 1988:8).

The first principle of media education was now, according to British media educationalist Len Masterman, that of 'non-transparency':

It insists that the media are rather more than simple "windows on the world" or "mirrors"

which reflect external reality in a way which needs no further explanation. It insists that television, newspapers, film, radio and advertisements are actively produced. They are involved in a process of constructing or representing reality rather than simply transmitting or reflecting it (Masterman, 1988:15).

The roots of this shift away from moral and aesthetic to political concerns within media studies lie in the 1968 social upheavals in France and the ensuing debates amongst French film theorists.

Coming after a period when film theory had been largely concerned with aesthetic questions, the new emphasis was on linking politics with theory. While the Surrealists and the Italian neo-realists were earlier examples of linking cinema and politics, Lapsley and Westlake (1988:8) point out that it was the further commitment to theory which marked the post-1968 alliance as distinctive.

*Cahiers du Cinema* reflected this new concern which centred around mainstream cinema's compliance in perpetuating the existing social order and conversely, in investigating the appropriate forms of oppositional cinema. The main criterion for evaluating a film now became its challenge to, or perpetuation of, the dominant ideology in society in both form and content. Central to this concern was the question of how the cinema involved the spectator in the process of reproducing the dominant ideology.

This problem was taken up by *Screen*, which, drawing on a combination of Althusserian Marxism, structuralism, semiotics, and psycho-analysis, came to dominate English-language theoretical film culture in the 1970s.

Following Althusser's (1971) essay on Ideological State Apparatuses, both the school and the media were seen as central state apparatuses, responsible for the dissemination of the dominant ideology, tied to the interests of the dominant economic class.

The 'rationality' underlying the Althusserian problematic was that of social reproduction. As Giroux (1981) points out, 'reproductive positions' focus on the ways in which the dominant classes are able to reproduce existing power relations in an unjust and unequal society. And as he further argues, there is a political project underlying this problem:

Reproductive rationality is based upon the principles of critique and reconstruction. Its guiding interests are linked to questions of power and political emancipation. Its theoretical project develops around an attempt to expose, criticise and change the way in which class-specific societies reproduce unequal power relations behind the backs of human beings (Giroux, 1981:16).

Critique now became central to the classroom practice of many left-leaning teachers. Many articles in *Screen's* sister journal *Screen Education* reminded teachers of their vanguard role in exposing the presence of the 'dominant ideology' in the school system in general and media texts in particular. Although this was, unlike the earlier Leavite 'call to arms', tied to an overt political project, what both shared was the underlying belief that the media had unambiguous 'effects' on their audience and that these needed to be exposed and combatted by the media teacher (see, for example, Ferguson, 1977/8:37-47).

Finally it must be stated that the theoretical hegemony of Althusserian Mar-

xism and Lacanian psycho-analysis resulted in a shift away from empirical studies on the media industries and audiences towards an approach which assumed an unproblematic 'positioning' of the viewer by the text so as to reproduce the dominant ideology within the social formation.

While few media educationalists would today still hold onto the functionalism inherent in Althusserianism, the thrust of his critique still holds much sway amongst media educationalists. The influence amongst British media teachers of the writings of Len Masterman (1980; 1985) bear testament to this. For example, Masterman (1980:5) writes of television education as being a 'demythologizing process', which, in revealing the selective practices by which images reach the screen, emphasises the constructed nature of the representations projected, making explicit their "suppressed ideological function". In a later work he points to the media's reproductive role in "producing particular kinds of audience consciousness" thus "reproducing the conditions which enable further economic production to take place" (Masterman, 1985:22).

In summary, this approach then recognises that the study of ideology is the study of power relations and the complex ways they are either sustained or challenged within a particular social formation. The recognition that media representations are always constructed leads to the proposition that they are always ideological (either challenging or sustaining existing power relations). The critical edge to a media education informed by this problematic rests on the hope that students will come away with an understanding of the way in which the media help normalise social inequalities. Hopefully, according to Giroux, this process of media 'demythification' will "help students account

critically for the nature of those objective and self-formative processes that have made them what they are at the present historical juncture of their lives" (Giroux, 1981:30).

### **From Questions of Ideology to Formations of Pleasure**

British educationalist, Robert Ferguson (1989), has noted that British media education has "moved from a period of certitude about its identity and purpose into a critical period of relativism and self-doubt". In this section I will explore the reasons for this growing sense of doubt.

What unites the Leavisite humanist and the Althusserian Marxist approaches to media education is both a general antipathy towards twentieth century mass cultural forms as well as a commitment to close textual readings. This latter activity, it is argued, is necessary if one is to extricate hidden textual meanings. However, both positions fail to engage with the actual complexity of the learning process, circumscribed as it is by the classroom relations of power, subordination, and resistance.

Williamson (1981/2) was one of the first writers to highlight this particular problem. She is dismissive of British media theorist Manuel Alvarado's argument that it is necessary to construct a pedagogy that *does not* depend on personal experience, and that one should instead teach about 'cultural hegemony'. Drawing on her own difficulty in attempting to teach schoolchildren about ideological representations in the media, she concludes that "students don't learn in the abstract, nor through moral purpose" (Williamson, 1981/2:85). Students learn best to 'see' the 'invisible' ideology, she argues, when it becomes in their own interest to do so. The reason for this is that when we engage students around issues such as images of women in

the media, we are dealing directly with the students' experience, not just of television images, but of *their own identities* (Williamson, 1981/2:83). She quotes an example of the problems this raises:

I had no luck in trying to show these 1st years how news-presentation is biased (again, using classic teaching material, coverage of a strike, of Trade Unionists, terrorism) – because the view put over by the headline or news item was their 'own' view, they *did* think strikes were caused by trouble-makers and that the IRA should be shot. So I had trouble making them 'see' bias in the news. Why should they have had a worked-out position on those things, so far removed from their own very limited homes and schooldays? And which I was trying to change – their view of TV, or their view of strikes and Irish politics (Williamson, 1981/2:84)?

While questions of subjectivity are important to debates on pedagogy within all subject areas, it is, according to Richards (1990), of particular importance to media education. This is because the kinds of interventions which Media Studies appears to make are likely to be more troublesome as they "address the constitutive elements of everyday life, and therefore 'personal' domains of subjectivity" (Richards, 1990:264).

Phil Cohen (1987) in his research into anti-racist teaching in British schools reached a similar conclusion. In his study Cohen points to the failure of what he terms the 'Enlightenment Model' of education which assumes that racism can be 'punctured' by the application of superior logic. According to Cohen, the appeal of popular racism is that it makes "imaginative

sense" of common predicaments. It is practical, behavioural ideology, rooted in everyday cultural practices and does not require theoretical legitimation or institutional support to become popular. It has a socio-logic all of its own. Furthermore, rationalist pedagogics imply academic methods of instruction which working-class students already resist. It assumes that ideologies – defined as a set of imaginary constructs or stereotypes – can be separated from and dissolved by 'real experience' – the direct imprint of sense impressions on conscious attitudes. But, Cohen argues, ideologies work precisely by constructing experience in particular, largely unconscious ways. It is by organising certain 'structures of feeling' and language that racism becomes 'common sense'.

What Cohen is pointing to is the complex nature of our socialisation into particular beliefs and attitudes. These are not free-floating in any idealist sense, but are related to the material conditions within which we live our lives. Because they are not arrived at consciously through a process of rational education, they cannot be shifted or altered through the input of 'superior' logic.

This general lack of attention, by media educators, to questions of subjectivity and the learning process has meant, according to Buckingham (1990) that most books on media education offer idealised accounts of the learning and teaching process in which students passively absorb the 'radical' knowledge which teachers hand down (traditional pedagogy) or else pass on as colleagues on an equal footing with pupils (progressive pedagogy). Whatever the pedagogical approach, the central aim has then been to replace the students false 'ideological' knowledge with true, 'objective' knowledge,

largely deriving from academic research.

Several streams feed into this 'paradigm shift' in theories concerned with audience-text relationships. Within the pages of *Screen* the first salvo was fired by Paul Willemen (1978) who argued that:

There remains an unbridgeable gap between 'real' readers/s/authors and 'inscribed' ones, constructed and marked in the text. Real readers are subjects in history, living in social formations, rather than mere subjects of a single text. The two types of subject are not commensurate (Willemen, 1978:49).

What Willemen was writing against was *Screen* orthodoxy which argued that as readers we can only comprehend a text by taking up the ideological position offered by the text (see, for example, MacCabe, 1985). The implication of this was that in the process of reading texts produced by the 'culture industries' we are ideologically 'fixed' into position. As such, the role of the media educator was to 'unfix' us.

The insights derived from what is known as 'reception theory' or 'reader-oriented criticism' have also been important in shifting attention away from the text and towards how readers reshape and manipulate texts to suit their own subjective needs (Allen, 1987).

Furthermore, there was the highly influential neo-Gramscian Cultural Studies approach developed in the 1970s by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies which theorised popular culture as either a site of incorporation or resistance to the dominant hegemonic order. Popular culture was now defined as the terrain upon which the struggle for hegemony took place (Hall, 1981).

Out of this new approach emerged both the important subcultural studies as well as the ethnographic research on television viewing undertaken by researchers working out of the Cultural Studies paradigm (Hall and Jefferson, 1975; Hobson, 1982; Brunson and Morley, 1980). These studies represented a break with the Frankfurt School inspired antipathy towards popular culture which had dominated the left since the 1940s.

Yet another attack on the old certainties was provided by the French cultural theorist Roland Barthes (1972) in *The Pleasure of the Text*. While in his earlier work, *Mythologies*, he had sought to explain a text by uncovering its singular ideology, his later work proposed that there is in fact a plurality of ideologies (or pleasures) a text can offer in its moment of reading. This pleasure, he argued, can only be experienced in the reading and can differ from reader to reader, and even from reading to reading.

Combining Barthes (1972) insights into pleasure with Hall's (1973) seminal work on encoding and decoding, Fiske (1987) argues that the variety of pleasures offered up by a text is a function of the variety of socially situated viewers. For those in easy accommodation with the dominant ideology, this pleasure will be conforming and reactionary, but it will still be experienced as self-generated. The subject will feel that she or he is voluntarily adopting a social position that happens to conform to the dominant ideology and is finding genuine pleasure in it. This, he argues, is pleasure acting as the motor of hegemony. However, for those who are less completely accommodated with the system, an essential component of pleasure must be an evasion, or at least a negotiation, of dominant ideological practices. This then opens up the spaces for groups to find their own



pleasures in relationship to the ideology they are evading (Fiske, 1987:234).

This linking of questions of pleasure to the process of decoding further highlights the resistance a media studies teacher is likely to face in attempting ideological text-deconstruction. Furthermore, as Therborn (1982) has argued, the process of constituting our identity involves an awareness of the differences between ourselves and others. This has obvious implications for classroom practice where teachers and pupils are often divided along those lines which go towards constituting our identity – especially, in this case, class, race, and age. As the Murdock and Phelps survey indicated was the case in British education, these differences are likely to result in different relationships and responses to mass cultural forms.

So, according to Dyer (1985), in teaching about representation, we should focus less on our own responses and more on the pupils interpretations. He writes:

Teachers often try to get pupils and students to see what a programme represents 'ideally' (that is, as the teacher understands it) without also finding out what it represents to them. We need to learn to listen better – especially to children – to understand what sense they in turn make of the work represented to them (Dyer, 1985:45).

However, as media educationalists, does this mean we should capitulate before the critique of the "enlightenment" model of education and the argument that "pleasure eludes rational consciousness" (Ang, 1985:103)? What about those hard-won insights which connect media representations to relations of power and subordination in the wider society? For, as Willemsen

argues, while it is true that a plurality of meaning is inherent in any form of discourse production, this plurality, together with the actual cultural products which produce this plurality, are all overdetermined and constrained by the general logic of capitalist production within which and by which they are located. It is precisely the capitalist logic which creates and defines the sites of possible contestation. Merely to play around within those spaces with the material offered is to consent to that process of definition, not to challenge it (Willemsen, 1987:34).

### **Finding the Middle Ground**

In his defence of commercial television broadcasting in Britain Ian Connel (1983) has argued that theirs is not to show the way to cultural improvement as is the BBC, but:

It is perhaps better to say that the commercial companies have during the last 30 years or so led the way in making connections with and expressing popular structures of feeling (Connel, 1983:76).

However, as Ann Gray (1987) correctly points out, it is an essentialist fallacy to assume that this popular 'structure of feeling' naturally emerges from the audiences for popular television. Rather, we need to recognise the role played by the dominant culture producing industries in the production of these 'structures'. She further argues that:

Rather than taking the 'structures of feeling' as a given, we require to know how these popular pleasures and tastes come about, what are the significant dimensions of the structures, what is being kept in place and what is being rendered invisible within the 'feelings' (Gray, 1987:24).

Here we have, I believe, one of the cornerstones of a critical media education practice. For as Judith Williamson (1986) points out:

surely we can try to understand what pleasures are had from mass culture and how personal and social needs feed into these pleasures, without therefore jumping to the conclusion that they are a "good thing" (Williamson, 1986:14).

As media educators we need to walk that fine line between appreciating that pupils' pleasures and self-identities are inseparable while also acknowledging that popular cultural forms are historically, politically and economically situated and structured. Thus Giroux (1981:30), drawing on Gramsci, argues that the task of a critical education is to use the spectacle and texts of everyday life as part of the pedagogical process to help students account critically for the nature of those objective and self-formative processes that have made them what they are.

This involves a process of dialogue in and through popular cultural forms and is very different to the condemnation *tout court*, in the name of high culture, of popular cultural forms by Marxists and Leavisites alike.

As media educators we also need to expose our students to alternative cultural forms (for example, African cinema). As Williamson argues (1986), we need to distinguish between those for whom popular culture is their *only* culture and those who have access to an alternative. While she admits that this may sound 'patronising', she argues, in relation to generations of the British working classes, that what has transformed their experience is not the perception that television is fun, but that there are radically different ways of thinking and explaining the everyday

experience of which popular culture plays a major part.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that in the area of mass-culture criticism, two opposing positions have come to define the outer perimeters of the terrain and that these positions have shaped British media education debates. On the one side there are the left and liberal-humanist theorists, united in their basic distrust of mass-cultural forms. The left version distinguishes between mass-culture (of the 'culture industries') and popular culture (of 'the people') and sees the role of the former as one of diverting peoples' gazes from the deep-seated divisions inherent within capitalist societies. Through a process of ideological deconstruction, media education it is hoped, will transform 'false' consciousness into 'true' consciousness.

The liberal-humanist version of this approach, as represented typically in the writings of F.R. Leavis and the Leavisites, equates mass-cultural consumption with spiritual debasement. A media education built on Leavisite premises is concerned primarily with evaluation and appreciation of those media texts deemed appropriate by the teacher.

What unites both these positions is the 'hypodermic needle' model of the media which sees the media as having direct, unmediated 'effects' on their audiences.

On the other side of the divide are those culture theorists who wish to escape the pessimism of the older Marxist and liberal-humanist positions. With many of these theorists themselves having been raised on a diet of popular culture (seemingly without any debilitating effects), they have turned their attention from what texts do to

audiences to what audiences do with texts.

It is the desire to negotiate a path between these two positions which has contributed to the current fertile debate within studies of popular culture. As I have argued in this paper, these debates have been central to changing approaches to media education in Britain. By extension, it is my belief that if those of us involved in media education in this country wish to have a critically informed practice, there is much we can learn from the British experience.

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