

## **MEDIA EDUCATION AND THE END OF THE CRITICAL CONSUMER**

**David Buckingham**

*Institute of Education, University of London*

The idea of postmodernity is now well past its sell-by date. By the time it entered into popular consciousness in the early 1990s, it had already become something of a tired academic cliché. The most avant-garde cultural theorists have long since moved on to post-postmodernity; while others have joined the swelling backlash in favour of distinctly 'retro' theoretical positions such as political economy and the so-called 'new historicism'. Perhaps the greatest irony of all this is that postmodernism has been so easily accommodated within the academy. Indeed, some would argue that, in its esoteric and tortuous language and its apparent retreat from mundane empirical realities, postmodernist theory was always a quintessentially academic movement. Yet what seems to have been forgotten here is that postmodernity represents a fundamental challenge to established forms of education – to traditional conceptions of knowledge and learning, and to the institutional forms in which they are embedded.

In this paper, I want to return to confront this postmodern challenge to education. My aim is not to provide yet another recycled account of postmodernist theories. Nor do I seek to offer yet another abstract critique of teachers' everyday practices, from my privileged vantage point in the academy. Such analyses generally seem to amount to little more than rhetorical exhortation; and when it comes to spelling out the implications for classroom practice, they are often astonishingly evasive (see Buckingham, 1996). In this paper, I want to engage with the implications of postmodernity specifically in relation to media education. I want to consider whether media education is in fact necessarily a 'modernist' enterprise; and indeed, to what extent it needs to remain so. And I want to address these issues by drawing on research into specific aspects of classroom practice in schools.

## Media, education and social change: the postmodern challenge

Whether or not we subscribe to the idea of postmodernity, it is hard to deny that the relations between young people, the media and education are currently undergoing fundamental and far-reaching change. The proliferation of media technologies, the commercialisation and globalisation of media markets, the fragmentation of mass audiences and the rise of 'interactivity' are all fundamentally transforming our everyday experiences of the media. Digital media – and particularly the internet – have significantly increased the potential for active participation; although for the large majority of people who do not yet have access to these opportunities, there is a growing danger of exclusion and disenfranchisement. Nevertheless, the development of modern communication is resulting in a more heterogeneous environment, in which the boundaries between mass communication and interpersonal communication, and between producers and consumers, have become increasingly blurred. The media can no longer be seen – as they often are by media educators – as 'consciousness industries', inexorably imposing false ideologies or cultural values on passive audiences.

Many of these transformations apply with particular force to children and young people (see Buckingham, 2000). Young people are among the most significant markets for many of these new technologies and cultural forms; and even younger children are now coming to be seen as a powerful consumer group in their own right. This has significant implications in terms of young people's access to media: young people today can and do gain access to 'adult' media, via cable TV or video or the internet, much more readily than their parents ever could – a development which has resulted in an increasingly desperate search for new means of asserting control. Yet on the other hand, young people also have their own 'media spheres', which adults may find increasingly difficult to penetrate or understand. The notion of the child as vulnerable and in need of protection from the dangers of the media – an assumption on which media education is frequently based – is increasingly giving way to the notion of the child as a 'sovereign consumer'.

However, it is important to stress that these developments are not simply confined to the domain of the media. Many social commentators agree that the contemporary world is characterised by a growing sense of fragmentation and individualisation. At least in Western countries, the shift towards a 'post-industrial' consumer society is seen to have destabilised existing patterns of employment, settlement and social life. Established social institutions, the rules of conduct of civil society and traditional conceptions of citizenship are increasingly being called into question. These developments have significant implications in terms of the formation of identities. Social and geographical mobility is undermining traditional social bonds, such as those of family and community; and the majority of young people today are growing up in increasingly heterogeneous, multicultural societies, in which very different conceptions of morality and very different cultural traditions exist side-by-side. In this context, identity comes to be seen as a matter of individual choice, rather than birthright or destiny; and in the process, it is argued, individuals have also become more diverse and flexible – and to some extent more autonomous – in their uses and interpretations of cultural goods. In fact, these new societies are in many respects more unequal and more polarised than those they appear to be replacing: identities and lifestyles cannot be freely chosen by all. Nevertheless, contemporary consumer cultures seem to provide at least a superficial appearance of choice, and hence to promote a subjective belief in the power and agency of the individual.

Here again, there are some aspects of these developments that apply with particular force to children and young people (see Buckingham, 2000). The established relations of authority and power between adults and children are changing; and so are social definitions of childhood. On the one hand, the social institutions that have traditionally sought to define childhood – most obviously the conventional form of the nuclear family – are gradually eroding. Conservative social critics have bemoaned the fact that childhood itself seems to be dying or disappearing. Children seem to be 'getting older younger': they are having sex earlier, there is a rise in child crime, and drugs have become a taken-for-granted aspect of many young people's recreational experiences. On the other hand, however, it could be argued that childhood is becoming increasingly institutionalised: children today spend more time in formal education, they are less independently mobile and they are financially dependent on their parents for

an increasing period. There have been more and more disciplinary measures to curb young people's autonomy – most overtly in the form of curfews, parental control orders and other changes in the criminal justice system.

Nevertheless, these changes represent a significant shift in young people's status as a distinctive social group. While there are some who wish to reassert traditional relationships, and to return to an era in which children were 'seen but not heard', there are others who welcome these changes as an extension of democracy and of the rights of citizenship to children. Thus, alongside attempts to deal with a perceived breakdown in discipline, there has also been a growing emphasis on children's rights – although children's rights as citizens have become increasingly difficult to separate from their rights as consumers. On the one hand, therefore, it seems that traditional boundaries between adults and children are being eroded; although on the other, it seems that they are being redrawn.

So what are the implications of this situation for education? Most obviously, it suggests that there is a likely to be a widening gap between young people's worlds outside school and their experience in the classroom. While the social and cultural experiences of young people have been dramatically transformed over the past fifty years, schools have signally failed to keep pace with change. The classrooms of today would be easily recognisable to the pioneers of public education of the mid-nineteenth century: the ways in which teaching and learning are organised, the kinds of skills and knowledge that are valued in assessment, and a good deal of the actual curriculum content, have changed only superficially since that time. Indeed, some have argued that schooling is now heading determinedly backwards, retreating from the uncertainty of contemporary social change towards the apparently comforting stability of a new 'educational fundamentalism', in which traditional relationships of authority between adults and children can be restored (Kenway and Bullen, 2001).

There is now an extraordinary contrast between the high levels of activity that characterise children's consumer cultures and the passivity that increasingly suffuses their schooling. Of course, teachers have perennially complained about children's weakening 'attention span'; although in fact the levels of intense concentration and energy that characterise children's playground engagements

with phenomena like Pokémon are quite at odds with the deadening influence of mechanical teaching and testing that currently prevails in many classrooms (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, in press). Indeed, as Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen (2001) point out, the 'knowledge politics' of children's consumer culture often explicitly oppose those of formal schooling, presenting teachers as dull and earnest, worthy not of emulation but of well-justified rebellion and rejection. Like a Rabelaisian 'carnival', children's media culture has increasingly become an arena in which authoritarian values of seriousness and conformity are subverted and undermined. In this context, it is hardly surprising if children perceive schooling as marginal to their identities and concerns – or at best, as a kind of functional chore.

Where does this leave media education specifically? To some extent, it would seem to make the case for media education all the more urgent. And yet, like education in general, media education could be seen as part of the modernist project. It is effectively premised on the cultivation of rational thinking and the possibility of well-regulated public communication. As media educators, we set out to produce well-informed, responsible citizens, who will be able to take a distanced stance towards the immediate pleasures of the media. We want to give our students the critical knowledge and the analytical tools that we believe will empower them – that will enable them to function as autonomous, rational social agents. Our aim is to produce 'critical consumers' – even if what we mean by the term 'critical' in this context is often far from adequately defined.

Yet many postmodern theorists would argue that this is now a redundant exercise, in the light of the broader changes I have sketched above. Educators, they argue, can no longer see themselves as 'legislators', imposing the values and norms of official culture (Usher and Edwards, 1994). The best they can hope for is to act as 'interpreters', making available 'multiple realities' and diverse forms of perception and knowledge. The 'realist' conceptions of representation, rationality and objectivity on which education is based are, it is argued, in terminal crisis. Meanwhile, the missionary rhetoric of public schooling – its claim to 'emancipate' students from power, and transform them into autonomous, self-realising social agents – is seen as merely another illusion of capitalist modernity.

These issues are, if anything, much more acute for media education than they might be for more conventional academic subjects. In the context I have outlined, attempts to impose cultural, moral or political authority over the media that children experience in their daily lives are very unlikely to be taken seriously. If, as in many cases, they are based on a paternalistic contempt for children's tastes and pleasures, they are certainly bound to be rejected. The notion that students might be somehow 'weaned off' what they perceive as their own popular culture, in favour of the teacher's cultural or political values, would seem to be increasingly impossible. Even where teachers have sought to engage more positively with students' media cultures, they have often sought to colonise them for their own purposes – and in the process, they frequently end up simply re-inscribing traditional notions of what counts as valid knowledge.

Some of these issues have been addressed by media educators in recent years. Teachers have increasingly recognised that media education should not be a crusade to rescue children from the media. Protectionist approaches to media education – whether cultural, moral or political in nature – are increasingly seen as redundant, if not positively counter-productive. There is evidence that younger teachers today, who have grown up with electronic media, are more relaxed in their attitudes: they are less likely to see themselves as missionaries denouncing the influence of the media, and are more enthusiastic about young people using media as forms of cultural expression (Morgan, 1998; Richards, 1998).

Nevertheless, media education remains a fundamentally modernist enterprise. Media educators continue to distrust students' pleasures in the media. We are wary of sensuality, of emotion and of irrationality, and we find it hard to deal with them when they arise (as they inevitably do). We are led by a political drive to fix and define meanings and pleasures, in order that they can be rationally evaluated and contested. While we are beginning to acknowledge the potential of media production, we are often suspicious of the creative play with meaning that it seems to afford. Ultimately, the only learning that seems to count is the learning that can be made conscious – that can be rendered in terms of the discursive, 'critical', academic mode.

Of course, these may be necessary emphases – or at least unavoidable ones. Nevertheless, the developments I have described pose some important new questions for media educators. The more heterogeneous media environment in which young people are now growing up poses a challenge for the 'identity politics' of contemporary media education, with their emphasis on rationality and 'realist' conceptions of representation. It may create the space for much more 'playful' forms of pedagogy, that engage more directly with young people's emotional investments in the media, and with their sense of agency. In this paper, I want to suggest that there are significant possibilities here, particularly in terms of young people's media production. Yet I also want to caution against a kind of easy optimism. I believe we need to look more closely at what we want students to learn in these contexts, and at how we know that they have learnt it. As such, I suspect my arguments may reflect a continuing adherence to a modernist approach.

#### Postmodern identities?

As I have implied, the experience of young people growing up in the contemporary media environment is now vastly different from that of the majority of their teachers. This in turn inevitably complicates the task of media educators. It places significant limits on what we can possibly know, and on how relevant our teaching can be. In place of the accessible 'common culture' of broadcast television, young people are now faced with a vast proliferation of media options, many of which may be unavailable – or at least incomprehensible – to us. We can no longer assume that our students will be sharing similar experiences with each other, let alone that they might do so with us. And we can no longer trust in a simplistic account of 'identity politics', in which media images are seen to have singular and predictable consequences in terms of our students' perceptions of their place in the world.

While media teachers clearly do need to keep pace with the enthusiasms of their students, they cannot hope to know more than they do – nor should they. Indeed, in my experience, personal preferences and investments in aspects of media can

easily be a liability in the classroom: students are very likely to reject what you enjoy, particularly if you make that clear to them. Yet the 'generation gap' between teachers and students is not simply a matter of taste. It may also have much more far-reaching implications in terms of the theoretical assumptions that inform our teaching.

A good example of this is in teaching about representation. In an interesting reflection on her own teaching, Elizabeth Funge (1998) draws attention to the gap between her students' perceptions of gender in the media and the feminist theories on which much media education is based. She argues that '1970s feminism', with its emphasis on ideological deconstruction, simply fails to connect with contemporary gender politics – as embodied, for example, in the notion of 'girl power'. Analysing 'stereotypes' and the 'oppressive' objectification of the female body does not help us to understand the appeal of the Spice Girls or Lara Croft; nor, Funge argues, does it connect with her female students' 'insistent and quite powerful expression of their own sexuality'.

The implication here is not just that media educators need to engage with their students' changing media experiences. They also need to recognise how those experiences may be fundamentally different from their own – and that those differences may well have broader theoretical implications. The argument is not just that the media themselves are different, but also that the ways in which young people engage with them – the modalities of interpretation and engagement and investment – are also fundamentally changed. Funge argues that we are now in 'a new phase of representation', in which multiple readings and ambivalent reactions to media may be the norm. In this 'postmodern' context, she suggests, we need to recognise that media representations are more complex, and audiences more sophisticated and autonomous, than was the case in earlier times. Contemporary representations of gender cannot be encompassed by outdated notions of 'stereotyping', 'negative images' and the 'male gaze' – although it is precisely these kinds of ideas which, as she argues, continue to circulate in media education.

To some extent, the argument here takes us back to Judith Williamson's (1981/2) concern about the lack of connection between ideological analysis and lived

experience; although Funge also raises the important question – which Williamson fails to address – about where any of this leaves the boys in her class. The more challenging question, however, is whether the ways in which young people now define and construct their gendered identities – and how they use the media in doing so – are significantly different from those of earlier times. The evidence here is bound to be difficult to establish, although some feminist commentators on postmodern youth culture certainly suggest as much (e.g. McRobbie, 1994). Indeed, some feminist theorists have challenged the very notion of a fixed or essential gender identity, arguing rather that gender is a kind of performance or 'masquerade' (Butler, 1990); and of course the figure of Madonna has become the most well-known popular icon of this 'postmodern' version of femininity (Schwichtenberg, 1993).

Yet even if we accept these arguments, it is debatable whether we can extend them to other areas of identity formation. There have been very significant shifts in the social position and experience of women over the past few decades, and it would be surprising if these were not reflected in media representations. Yet whether similar arguments might apply to 'race' and ethnicity, for example, is more questionable. Some commentators have certainly been inclined to celebrate what they see as the emergence of 'powerful' non-white personalities and characters, and more hybrid 'new ethnicities', in the media; although the continuing presence of racist rhetoric and assumptions is hard to ignore. Yet here again, the implications of this in terms of 'identity politics' – and for education – are unlikely to be straightforward.

Phil Cohen (1998) offers some useful reflections on these issues in his account of teaching about 'race' in the context of arts education. Cohen firmly rejects simplistic notions of 'positive images', arguing that they are based on a rationalistic approach, which regards racism as merely a result of irrationality or misinformation. Like Funge, he argues that images can be read in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways; and that the meanings attached to a notion such as 'race' are inherently unstable. Cohen argues that a more constructive starting point would be to recognise the elements of 'masquerade' – parody, mimicry, playful juxtaposition – that characterise some contemporary youth cultures; and he suggests that these can be used by students to subvert essentialised ethnic

identities, and to generate more complex narratives of the self. His example, an image of an 'Indian Cowgirl Warrior', created by an ethnically mixed group of 7- and 8-year-old girls, is a distinctly hybrid, 'multicultural' creation which also gives voice to their resistance to racial injustice.

Behind both the studies I have mentioned here lies a broader dissatisfaction with 'modernist' conceptions of meaning and identity. They explicitly contest 'politically correct' teaching, which seeks to provide a form of 'counter-propaganda' to what are seen as the ideological delusions promoted by the mainstream media. They also imply that identity itself cannot be seen in singular terms, as something fixed or essential. As such, they suggest that prescriptive teaching strategies, that try to fix meanings and impose 'correct' thoughts, may miss much of the positive political potential of students' media cultures. The imposition of legislative teacherly authority may simply be missing the point.

### Playful pedagogies

Ultimately, these questions of politics and identity cannot be divorced from the crucial dimension of pleasure. As Roger Silverstone (1999) suggests, pleasure and play are central aspects of our relationships with the media. The non-rational, the bodily and the erotic are fundamental dimensions of social experience, yet they are often disavowed. Silverstone argues that popular culture has always offered an arena for play, in which these things could be sanctioned, if only temporarily. In the electronic media, we can find the same marked spaces for play; although the boundaries between play and seriousness are becoming more permeable and less distinct. And play, as he suggests, is also an opportunity to claim our individuality, to construct our identities through the roles we take and the rules we follow.

This playful – or 'ludic' – dimension has been a key emphasis in postmodern theory. In place of realist notions of representation, some postmodernists favour an irreverent play with meaning, in which seriousness and rationality are replaced by irony and parody. According to Usher and Edwards (1994: 15): "serious" modern culture aims to give a "truthful" representation of reality and thus to

educate people into viewing the world in particular ways conducive to "progress". It is premised on the notion of mastery through rationality, and on the denial or suppression of desire. By contrast, postmodern culture subverts these totalising discourses (which seek to explain the ultimate 'truth') through a kind of eclecticism and a refusal of fixed meanings. For some, this 'ludic' dimension of postmodernism is fundamental to its resistance towards an oppressive modernist status quo – although others argue that it is here that postmodernism most clearly displays its complicity with the consumerism of contemporary capitalism.

As I have indicated, media production provides a space in which students can explore their pleasures and emotional investments in the media, in a way that is much more subjective and 'playful' than is the case with critical analysis. Of course, production is itself often pleasurable, not least because of its collaborative nature: being part of a team, sharing your work with peers, having a laugh, dressing up and enjoying in-jokes, are absolutely central to the activity. At the same time, there is a sense in which many production projects reflect a kind of subversion or transgression of the rules of 'serious' educational endeavour; although as we shall see, this can have difficult consequences.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these playful dimensions of media education have been more successfully realised with younger children. In the context of literacy teaching, the work of Anne Haas Dyson (1997) and Rebekah Willett (2001) provides interesting insights into the ways in which children use elements of media and popular culture in their creative writing. In the classroom Dyson describes, the children engaged in a practice called 'Author's Theatre', in which they narrated and enlisted their classmates to act out their stories. In this context, the written story became a 'ticket to play': the Author's Theatre brought some of the informal play of the schoolyard into the classroom - and with it, the complex negotiation of social relationships and identities that such play necessarily entails. The children's extensive use of media characters and narratives (particularly superhero cartoons) in their writing thus became a means of defining and enacting their social identities, as well as a focus of potential tension between the official culture of the school and the unofficial culture of the children's everyday lives.

Similarly, Willett's (2001) study focuses on children's use of media themes and characters in the context of a 'process writing' classroom. The children drew enthusiastically on elements of their peer culture, such as the Spice Girls, computer games, and the movie Titanic; but Willett shows that they were doing much more than simply imitating media-based narratives. Indeed, despite the apparently open invitation to write, the children engaged in some quite tortuous negotiations in their efforts to align their use of media material with the 'rules' of school writing. Like Dyson, Willett shows how the use of media provides the basis for a kind of 'identity work', in which particular friendships as well as broader aspects of social identity (most obviously gender) are being negotiated and defined. (Other studies in this vein may be found in Marsh (1999) and Dyson (1999).)

In different ways, both authors address some of the teacherly anxieties that often surround children's use of media. Willett shows that boys' media enthusiasms – for example, for computer games – are less easily adapted to the preferred conventions of school writing than girls', and are more likely to provoke moralistic concerns about 'violence'. Dyson attempts to 'recover' aspects of popular culture, for example by comparing superhero cartoons to ancient Greek myths; although she also subjects the texts on which the children draw - X-Men, The Three Ninjas, Power Rangers and so on - to some rather summary ideological judgments of her own, both about 'violence' and about 'stereotyping'.

These issues are addressed in a more direct way in Donna Grace and Joseph Tobin's (1998) study of the use of video production in an elementary school in Hawaii. Here, the open-ended invitation to produce videotapes resulted in the children frequently transgressing the norms and conventions of school life. While many of the productions were quite unproblematic, others showed actions and situations, or used language, that the adults in authority considered rude, inappropriate or unacceptable. Many of these productions were influenced by popular culture, not only by children's cartoons and family movies, but also in some cases by horror films and 'taboo' programmes like Beavis and Butthead. As in the Rabelaisian 'carnival', the emphasis on laughter and parody, bodily functions, horrific violence and 'bad' taste represented a playful inversion of traditional forms of order and authority (Bakhtin, 1968).

Grace and Tobin argue that, while 'progressive' educators may outwardly appear to encourage 'self-expression', they frequently attempt to constrain it. By contrast, this project did allow 'a place for pleasure', in which the children's humour and everyday interests could be recognised in the classroom. At the same time, several of the videos clearly – and in some instances, apparently self-consciously – violated the norms of 'political correctness'. Parodic representations of disabled characters and of native Hawaiian culture, or the reproduction of stereotypical views of gender and physical attractiveness, clearly made the adults who saw them uncomfortable. While Grace and Tobin acknowledge the difficulties here, they argue that this 'carnavalesque' approach allows such differences to be represented and addressed, rather than attempting to ignore them or wish them away.

Taken together, these studies make a strong case for the value of a more open-ended, 'playful' approach to media production. However, they also draw attention to some of its potential problems. All these studies focus on the children, and none describes the actual teaching process in any detail. In the case of Willett and Dyson, the primary aim of the activity is to encourage creative writing, rather than to develop children's understanding of the media. For Grace and Tobin, the aims are rather less clear. While they claim not to be celebrating the children's transgressions of classroom norms, they do not explain how teachers might intervene in this kind of activity, beyond using their 'intuition and judgment' to block projects that might prove unduly offensive. Yet the basis for any such intervention – and what children might be expected to learn from such activities – needs to be more clearly identified.

### The politics of parody

In practice, very few media production activities in schools are as apparently open-ended as those I have just described. In the context of media education, the aims of production work are nearly always defined in conceptual terms. Production is generally seen as a concrete way of exploring issues to do with representation,

institution or audience; and such activities often take the form of quite tightly structured simulations or 'exercises'. Nevertheless, production is an arena in which teachers necessarily cede some control to students; and what they choose to do with that control is not always to our liking. Even simulation activities can allow a sanctioned space for play, in which it becomes possible to speak the unspeakable, to flirt with what may be clearly recognised as politically incorrect – and, as we shall see, the political consequences of this are often complex and problematic.

Media educators have frequently expressed concern about the dangers of students imitating mainstream media. It seems to be assumed that if students imitate dominant forms, they will somehow inevitably and invisibly imbibe the ideologies those forms are seen to contain. Such arguments are based on rather simplistic assumptions about the ways in which students read and use the media; and they also seem to ignore much of what actually goes on in students' productions.

Where it does occur, imitation frequently involves parody – that is, a self-conscious and exaggerated use of dominant conventions for the sake of comic effects or ridicule. There are several reasons for this. Parody can provide an escape from the potential embarrassment that production work frequently seems to cause. Students recognise that their own work is unlikely ever to be as polished or authentic as the 'real thing'; and rather than being seen to fail, it is much more comfortable to pass off what you are doing as parody. For many, 'play acting' in a group is also a potentially uncomfortable situation; and so, here again, it is often easier to exaggerate for comic effect. And, as I shall indicate, parody can also provide a useful way of dealing with the ideological imperatives of teachers, since it allows one to use dominant forms while simultaneously disavowing any commitment to them.

Parody might be seen as the postmodern phenomenon par excellence. It rests on a kind of rejection of the fixity of meaning, and of the seriousness of authorship. While parody might be seen to be a matter of the author's intention, it also depends crucially on the judgment of the reader. And if the reader does not recognise the signals of the parodic intention, or the difference between the original and the parody, this may have problematic consequences. It is not clear how far we can trust what the author says about the work – since the claim to

parody can obviously function as a post-hoc rationalisation or justification. Parody potentially offers a freedom in which nobody can be held to account for what they say. These ambiguities may be particularly problematic where the authors are students and the readers are their teachers.

Two of my own research studies point to some of the difficulties that can arise here. The first was part of a broader project described in detail elsewhere (Buckingham, Grahame and Sefton-Green, 1995: Chapter 6).

One of the productions here, created by a group of six 14-year-old boys, was a trailer for a situation comedy entitled *Flat Broke*, about a group of ill-matched characters sharing a flat. The characters were all perceived by the students themselves as crude stereotypes: a violent man-hating feminist, a gay child-molester, a Greek macho-man and a freeloading 'slut'. While there were some objections from other members of the class (and ourselves as teachers) about its appropriateness for the target audience (11-year-olds), these were quickly swept aside; and indeed one of the leading students in the group dismissed them as merely a form of 'censorship'.

However, the most significant problem the group had to negotiate here was an ideological one. In presenting their ideas to the class, the students were noticeably more 'politically correct' in their descriptions of the characters than they were when talking with each other. The students insisted that the humour was even-handed, and that in any case, a cast of 'outrageous stereotypes' was exactly what one would expect in a situation comedy. Of course, the people whom the students were primarily seeking to 'outrage' were ourselves as teachers, and the wider institution of the school; and it is notable here that the feminist character was given the surname of the (male) class teacher. In a sense, the students saw the project as an opportunity to speak the unspeakable - to unleash the 'unpopular' and subversive things that are normally restrained by the institution of the school (cf. Britzman, 1991).

However, it would be mistaken to attempt to justify this kind of work through some simple-minded notion of 'resistance'. The leaders of this group were unashamedly homophobic, and justified the inclusion of the predatory gay character on the basis that they all 'hated gays'. The situation with the Greek

character was more complex, in that the boy who devised and played him was also Greek; and while he strongly resisted the accusation that this portrayal was racist, it could certainly be seen as a kind of disavowal of his own ethnicity. One of the most significant difficulties here, however, was that the students were able to co-opt the arguments that one might have used to challenge them. In their written accounts, they themselves described the show as 'stereotyped' and even 'politically incorrect', and ultimately doubted whether it would be shown by a 'liberal' TV station. The fact that the activity was a simulation, and that they were placed in the role of fictional producers, enabled the students to reject the suggestion that the programme represented their 'own' views. The ambiguous nature of the production - as simultaneously fictional and real - effectively enabled them to have their cake and eat it.

The second study here (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 1994: Chapter 10) raises similar contradictions and dilemmas. Slutmopolitan was a systematic parody of the woman's magazine Cosmopolitan produced by four 17-year-old girls in another London school, as part of their A-level Media Studies coursework. The magazine comprised sixteen pages in full colour. There was a front cover based around a photograph of a cleavage adorned with an anti-nuclear pendant; an advert for 'Tina's Tights' comprising a shot of legs clad in 'tarty' fishnets; and a back cover in the form of a full page advert for the chocolate bar Flake, in traditional fellatio style. Inside, there were a number of problem pages, including 'Dear Doreen', who dealt with 'the dreaded broken nail'; 'Clare's Clever Cookery Page', which described how to cook frozen peas, illustrated by a model in 'suggestive' poses; and 'Deirdre's Do-it-Yourself', which explained the complexities of changing a light bulb.

On one level, Slutmopolitan could be seen as a parodic deconstruction of a dominant media form, in which 'theoretical' issues of gender representation are quite explicitly addressed. Yet the pleasures of this project derived their energy not so much from theoretical critique as from the display of the body, a rude and vigorous sense of humour, and from the shared sense of 'having a laugh'. Here again, production provided a kind of ambiguity, a space for play, in which meanings could not be fixed once and for all.

Yet this ambiguity posed some problems, particularly when it came to assessment. Reading the students' written accounts, it became clear that the authors themselves did not always agree on the target of the parody: in some instances, it was the magazines, but in others it was their readers; for some, it was the conventional media representation of the 'slut', while for others it was simply real 'sluts' themselves. As this implies, the project seemed to function on several levels at once, both from the point of view of its creators and of ourselves as teachers. Indeed, this ambiguity was partly the point. The parodic dimension of the project implicitly positioned its target as 'other people'; yet it simultaneously permitted the girls to become those other people, or at least to recognise (and indulge) the 'otherness' in themselves. By providing opportunities to enact 'sluttish' behaviour, the project enabled the girls to display their sexuality (or a construction of their sexuality) in a semi-public forum. The resulting material could be seen as hopelessly sexist; yet it could also be seen as subversive - at least in the context of the girls' positioning as 'children' within the power-relations of the school.

Like the work described by Grace and Tobin (1998), Slutmopolitan could be seen as an example of the carnivalesque, subverting the respectable through a form of bodily transgression. Indeed, from the postmodern feminist perspective identified above, it could be regarded as a kind of celebration and a deconstruction of the masquerade of femininity. From this position, gender is seen, not just as a form of behaviour or a personal attribute, but in itself as a form of parody (Butler, 1990) - although even the most explicitly 'feminist' of the authors - and this is a label they would probably all have refused - would not have conceptualised the politics of their project in this way.

While such work offers a valuable alternative to the drily rationalistic emphases of some aspects of media education, therefore, it also poses some difficulties. Simply celebrating the pleasure of such work as a form of 'subversion' or 'transgression' of dominant norms fails to recognise that it can also reinforce existing inequalities and forms of oppression. These kinds of production activities do offer students very different positions in relation to the authority of the teacher and the school; although ultimately, it would be too much to claim that they 'empower' students - whatever we might take that to mean (cf. Ellsworth, 1989). It is difficult to ascertain what kind of learning might be going on here, and the relation of that

learning to any kind of political consciousness. At best, we might argue that such work offers students a comparatively 'safe' space in which they can play with the range of identities that are available to them, and reflect upon their contradictory possibilities and consequences. But if that reflection is not at some point made explicit, it is hard to see how, as teachers, we can promote it or engage in a dialogue with it.

Working through pleasure?

Sara Bragg (2000) takes on many of these arguments in her investigation of 16-17-year-old students' work on the theme of horror. In some respects, horror could be seen as a 'limit case' here, since its appeal so clearly bypasses attempts at intellectual rationalisation. Indeed, as Bragg suggests, it is a 'degraded' genre that is often accused of leading its fans into moral chaos. Bragg firmly rejects the defensive view of media education as a form of 'moral technology', for example in addressing the 'problem' of media violence. So what are then the positive grounds for teaching about horror?

Bragg's answer is given most effectively in her analyses of student productions. One such production, a trailer for a serial killer film called *White Gloves*, produced by 16-year-old Lauren, displays several 'politically incorrect' characteristics akin to those in the parodies described above. The killer is Spanish, and his ethnicity is effectively seen as the sole motivation for his actions (he has 'some sort of chip' against the English); and his victims are helpless elderly women, who are implicitly regarded as dispensable. Lauren's production could undoubtedly be read as merely a reproduction of the patriarchal values of the slasher movie, in which men victimise powerless women. Yet Bragg argues that the contemporary horror genre cannot be reduced to simplistic formulae such as 'violence' or 'misogyny'; and that Lauren's work displays a very self-conscious control of its conventions that is far from 'unthinking' imitation.

More significantly, however, Bragg suggests that the experience of production enabled Lauren to work through some complex and difficult emotions and

dilemmas. She argues that the figure of the male killer serves as a valuable cipher that allows her to explore – and yet simultaneously to disavow – a desire for control that is socially denied to her as a young woman. Lauren's trailer shows the killer struggling against his own violent impulses: his male power is not secure, in that the murders can only be committed through the agency of the white gloves. Bragg argues that the production offered Lauren shifting forms of identification – both with the killer and with the victims, but also as a distanced viewer and as the 'director' of the piece. This allowed her to step outside that identities available to her – as a young woman and as a student – and to take up new relationships to those around her, even if only temporarily.

A second example, Richard's *18 With A Bullet*, features a group of teenagers in the middle of the woods being systematically killed off by a psychopathic killer, who in the closing sequence is himself killed by a large bear. Here again, the scenario shows a confident grasp of horror conventions, and particularly those of the 'splatter movie'. Yet again, however, Bragg argues that the scenario and the trailer should not be seen merely as 'exercises' in genre. They also enable Richard to explore some unacknowledged fantasies of male masochism, albeit (in this case) with the distancing mechanism of humour. Meanwhile, Richard's accompanying essay tells a further story: while it might be dismissed by examiners as merely 'descriptive', it displays verve and irony in describing the improvised and ad hoc ways in which much learning happens.

Neither of these productions is explicitly parodic, in the manner of *Slutmopolitan*, although they do display a similar degree of control of generic conventions. As such, they offer much that could form the basis for more explicit reflection and analysis. However, Bragg's argument seeks to move beyond such ultimately rationalistic aspirations. Attempting to assess such work merely in terms of what it tells us about students' 'conceptual understanding' is inevitably reductive; and forcing students to reflect upon it in the narrow regime of the traditional academic essay is to miss much of the significance of what takes place. Yet at the same time, Bragg is not arguing for production simply as a form of 'self-expression', or as a therapeutic opportunity to explore one's deeper psychic tensions. She directly challenges the notion that students should be seen to speak with a singular,

authentic 'voice', and that they should be held accountable for what they say with it.

In some ways, these arguments could be seen as an extension of the criticisms I have raised in earlier chapters. Yet Bragg's account takes us beyond the 'modernist' paradigm in which most accounts of media education are situated – including, ultimately, my own. It challenges media educators' obsession with 'critical distance' and 'reasoned discussion', their implicit distrust of the emotional and the irrational, and their drive for final, definitive meanings. It disputes the idea that there can ever be a conscious, controlling ego at the heart of our learning; and it rejects the idea that teachers should be perpetually monitoring their students' moral or ideological progress, forcing them into the mode of the dutiful student.

Following John Shotter (1993) and Sue Turnbull (1998), Bragg calls for a greater emphasis on the 'practical-moral knowledge' that is embedded within everyday activities and social relationships. This 'knowing of the third kind' is distinct from knowing that (a knowledge of facts or principles) and knowing how (a knowledge of techniques): it is neither abstract nor technical, but depends upon the judgments of others, and is the kind of knowledge that one can only have from within a specific social situation. From this 'ethical' perspective, responsibility for making cultural, moral or ideological judgments cannot lie with teachers alone; and students must be able to work with what they have and who they are, rather than in terms of what teachers might like them to be.

## Conclusion

In the instances I have discussed in this paper, young people seem to be engaging in new forms of learning that implicitly call into question the theoretical or 'critical' knowledge that media educators have traditionally sought to promote. They seem to be developing more playful – and perhaps 'postmodern' – conceptions of knowledge and learning that move beyond the limitations of the traditional, rationalistic academic mode.

Nevertheless, these studies also raise important questions that need to be more fully addressed. In bringing popular culture into the classroom, we inevitably also bring with it a whole range of desires and experiences that are often left unspoken in schools – or, where they are spoken, are often policed out of existence. The fact that this is inevitable does not make it any less uncomfortable. Teachers obviously have a responsibility to make the classroom a functioning and mutually respectful community; and they have the right to prevent behaviour that they believe may disrupt this. But merely attempting to censor what we believe to be politically or morally unacceptable – or subjecting it to a form of 'critical analysis' which does little more than command obedience and assent – is bound to prove counter-productive.

Yet to assert the value of play, or to acknowledge the limitations of a purely rationalistic approach, is not to suggest that we should merely celebrate the activity and energy of young people's relationships with the media. If such a 'celebratory' approach were to exist, it would at best be merely superficial; and at worst, it could be seen to represent a form of complicity with the assertions of young people's 'consumer sovereignty' that are so enthusiastically promoted by the media industries. There are significant constraints on young people's autonomy as users of media, and on the diversity of their experiences. The media are inextricably tied up in broader networks of social, economic and institutional power; and it is vital that young people should understand the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which these operate.

As such, I would argue that media education cannot afford to abandon the 'modernist' project of cultural criticism. However, it does need to reformulate it in a way that builds upon the new potential of postmodern culture, and the new 'modalities of engagement' that it offers young people. Media production may have a particularly important role here, since it seems to provide a means for students to explore and reflect upon their changing positions in contemporary media culture. It allows a space for play, in which 'unspeakable' desires can be spoken and totalising discourses transgressed and undermined. Yet it is vital that students be encouraged to reflect upon those processes, to understand the conditions under which their own meanings and pleasures are produced; and in order to do so, they

will need to develop a metalanguage, a form of critical discourse, in which to describe and analyse what is taking place. Some would undoubtedly see this as a betrayal of the 'ludic' dimension of postmodernity, and an attempt to recuperate it within conventional forms of academic seriousness and rationality. Personally, I cannot imagine how education itself might be otherwise.

## REFERENCES

Bakhtin, M. (1968) *Rabelais and His World* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bragg, S. (2000) *Media Violence and Education: A Study of Youth Audiences and the Horror Genre* PhD thesis, Institute of Education, University of London.

Britzman, D. (1991) 'Decentering discourses in teacher education: or, the unleashing of unpopular things', *Journal of Education* 173(3): 60-80.

Buckingham, D. (1996) 'Critical pedagogy and media education: a theory in search of a practice', *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 28(6): 627-50.

Buckingham, D. (2000) *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media* Cambridge: Polity.

Buckingham, D., Grahame, J. and Sefton-Green, J. (1995) *Making Media: Practical Production in Media Education* London: English and Media Centre.

Buckingham, D. and Sefton-Green, J. (1994) *Cultural Studies Goes to School* London: Taylor and Francis.

Buckingham, D. and Sefton-Green, J. (in press) 'Gotta catch 'em all: structure, agency and pedagogy in children's media culture', *Media, Culture and Society*.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* London: Routledge.

Cohen, P. (1998) 'Tricks of the trade: on teaching arts and "race" in the classroom', in Buckingham, D. (ed.) *Teaching Popular Culture: Beyond Radical Pedagogy* London: UCL Press.

Dyson, A.H. (1997) *Writing Superheroes: Contemporary Childhood, Popular Culture and Classroom Literacy* New York: Teachers College Press.

Dyson, A.H. (1999) 'Coach Bombay's kids learn to write: children's appropriation of media material for school literacy', *Research in the Teaching of English* 33(4): 367-402.

Ellsworth, E. (1989) 'Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy', *Harvard Educational Review* 59(3): 297-324.

Funge, E. (1998) 'Rethinking representation: Media studies and the postmodern teenager', *English and Media magazine* 39: 33-36.

Grace, D. and Tobin, J. (1998) 'Butt jokes and mean-teacher parodies: video production in the elementary classroom', in Buckingham, D. (ed.) *Teaching Popular Culture: Beyond Radical Pedagogy* London: UCL Press.

Kenway, J. and Bullen, E. (2001) *Consuming Children: Education, Entertainment, Advertising* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Marsh, J. (1999) 'Batman and Batwoman go to school: popular culture in the literacy curriculum', *International Journal of Early Years Education* 7(2): 117-31.

McRobbie, A. (1994) *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* London: Routledge.

Morgan, R. (1998) 'Media education in Ontario: generational differences in approach', in Hart, A. (ed.) (1998) *Teaching the Media: International Perspectives* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Richards, C. (1998) 'Teaching Media Studies: "the cool thing to do"?' *Changing English* 5(2): 175-88.

Schwichtenberg, C. (ed.) (1993) *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities and Cultural Theory* Boulder, CO: Westview.

Shotter, J. (1993) *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life* Toronto; University of Toronto Press.

Silverstone, R. (1999) *Why Study the Media?* London: Sage.

Turnbull, S. (1998) 'Dealing with feeling: why *Girl Number Twenty* still doesn't answer', in Buckingham, D. (ed.) *Teaching Popular Culture: Beyond Radical Pedagogy* London: UCL Press.

Usher, R. and Edwards, R. (1994) *Postmodernism and Education* London: Routledge.

Williamson, J. (1981/2) 'How does *Girl Number Twenty* understand ideology?' *Screen Education* 40: 80-7.

Willett, R. (2001) *Children's Use of Popular Media in their Creative Writing* PhD thesis, Institute of Education, University of London.