Media Education and the End of the Critical Consumer

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In this article, David Buckingham addresses the challenges media educators face in dealing with postmodern media culture. Buckingham begins by outlining the nature of contemporary developments in children’s media environments and how these relate to broader changes in their social status. He argues that these developments represent a fundamental challenge to the modernist project of media education, with its emphasis on the production of critical consumers. Buckingham then moves on to draw on his own empirical studies of media classrooms in the United Kingdom. He deals first with the issue of identity formation and the implications of current changes for teaching about representation. Second, he considers the role of play, particularly in relation to students’ media production, and the potential limitations of a more ludic, or playful, approach. Buckingham then addresses the difficulties posed by students’ use of parody, both ideologically and in terms of learning. Finally, he considers a more comprehensively postmodern approach to media pedagogy. Ultimately, Buckingham suggests that the modernist project cannot simply be abandoned by media educators, but that it does need to be comprehensively reconsidered in light of contemporary developments.

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 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 favor 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 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. The rhetoric of postmodernism may be passé, but the questions it raises remain highly relevant. In this article, I confront this postmodern challenge to education, and specifically to media education. My aim is not to provide yet another recycled account of postmodernist theories, nor do I offer yet another abstract critique of teachers’ everyday practices from my privileged vantage point in the academy. Such analyses generally amount to little more than rhetorical exhortation, and they are often astonishingly evasive about the implications for classroom practice (Buckingham, 1996). Instead, I address these issues by drawing on research on specific aspects of classroom practice in United Kingdom (U.K.) schools, where media education has been well developed for several decades. Finally, I consider whether media education is in fact a modernist enterprise and to what extent it needs to remain so.

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. In this introductory section, I offer a summary of my own interpretation of these changes, which is developed in greater detail in my book *After the Death of Childhood* (Buckingham, 2000).

The proliferation of media technologies, the commercialization and globalization 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, particularly the Internet, have significantly increased the potential for active participation; however, for the 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 new media 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. Young people are among the most significant markets for many

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1 For accounts of this practice, see Alvarado and Boyd-Barrett (1992) and Buckingham (2003).
2 General accounts of these developments may be found, for example, in Poster (1995), Silverstone (1999), and Thompson (1995). See also the article by Paul Willis in this issue for an analysis of what he terms “the third wave of modernization.”
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 gain access to media aimed at adults via cable TV, video, or the Internet much more readily than their parents did as children. This development has resulted in an increasingly desperate search for new means of asserting parental control. On the other hand, media produced specifically for young people may be increasingly difficult for adults to access or understand. The notion of the vulnerable child in need of protection from the dangers of the media, an assumption on which media education is frequently based, is steadily giving way to the notion of the child as a sovereign consumer. Young people are increasingly addressed not as delicate young minds in need of careful nurture, but as lively, streetwise, and self-possessed. However illusory this may be, the media increasingly offer children an experience of autonomy and freedom, a sense that they, and not adults, are in charge (Buckingham, 2000; Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Kinder, 1999).

However, these developments are not simply confined to the domain of the media; they reflect and reinforce broader social changes. Many social commentators agree that the contemporary world is characterized by a growing sense of fragmentation and individualization (see Trend in this issue). At least in Western countries, the shift toward a postindustrial consumer society is seen to have destabilized 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 are seen to have significant implications in terms of identity formation. Social and geographical mobility is undermining traditional social bonds, such as those of family and community. 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 (see McCarthy et al. in this issue). In this context, identity comes to be seen as a matter of individual choice, rather than birthright or destiny. In the process of identity formation, it is argued, individuals have also become more diverse, flexible, and to some extent more autonomous. This is reflected in their uses and interpretations of cultural goods, which are seen to play an increasingly central role in this respect. In fact, these new societies are in many respects more unequal and more polarized 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.3

3 These issues are discussed in general terms by authors such as Bauman (2000), Giddens (1991), and Harvey (1989), and specifically in relation to “consumer culture” by Featherstone (1990) and Lury (1996).
Here again, there are some aspects of these developments that apply with particular force to children and young people. The established relations of authority and power between adults and children are changing, as are the social definitions of childhood. On the one hand, the social institutions that have traditionally defined childhood, such as the nuclear family, are gradually eroding. Conservative social critics have bemoaned the fact that childhood itself seems to be dying or disappearing. Children, they argue, 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, childhood seems to be increasingly institutionalized: children spend more time in formal education, are more confined to the home, and their lives are more rigorously scheduled by adults. Meanwhile, disciplinary measures to curb young people’s autonomy are increasing, most overtly in the form of curfews, parental control orders, and changes in the criminal justice system, at least in the U.K.4

These developments can be seen as symptomatic of a fundamental struggle for control between adults and children that has become increasingly intense in recent years. While some wish to return to an era in which children were “seen but not heard,” others 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 is also a growing emphasis on children’s rights. However, children’s rights as citizens are increasingly difficult to separate from their rights as consumers. On the one hand it seems that traditional boundaries between adults and children are being eroded, while on the other it seems they are being reasserted (Archard, 1993; Buckingham, 2000; Mayall, 2002).

So what are the implications of these developments for education? Most obviously, they suggest that there is likely to be a widening gap between young people’s worlds outside school and their experiences in the classroom. While the social and cultural experiences of young people have been dramatically transformed over the past fifty years, schools have not kept pace with change. The classrooms of today would be easily recognizable to the pioneers of public education of the mid-nineteenth century. It could be argued that the ways teaching and learning are organized, 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 suggest that schooling is now heading determinedly backwards, retreating from the uncertainty of contemporary social change toward the apparently comforting stability of a new “educational fundamentalism,” in which traditional relationships of authority between adults and children can be restored (Kenway & Bullen, 2001).

4 Accounts of these developments may be found in Buckingham (2000); James, Jenks, and Prout (1998); and Pilcher and Wagg (1996).
This is not to posit an absolute opposition between “school culture” and “children’s culture.” The school is inevitably a site for negotiation (and often for struggle) between competing conceptions of knowledge and cultural values (see Willis in this issue). Nevertheless, there is now an extraordinary contrast between the high levels of activity that characterize children’s consumer culture and the passivity that increasingly suffuses their schooling. The levels of intense concentration and energy that characterize 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 & Sefton-Green, 2003; see also Dyson in this issue). 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 by 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 (Bakhtin, 1968). 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 suggests that schools need to make much stronger attempts to address and build connections with young people’s media cultures, and thus seems to make the case for media education all the more urgent. 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 toward 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, and thereby 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 ill defined (Buckingham, 1996, 2003).

Many postmodern theorists would argue that this is a redundant exercise in light of the broader changes sketched above. Educators, postmodernists argue, can no longer see themselves as legislators who impose the values and norms of official culture on students (Usher & 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, these postmodern theorists contend that the missionary rhetoric of public schooling — its claim to emancipate students from power and transform them into autonomous, self-realizing social agents — is merely another illusion of capitalist modernity (Usher & Edwards, 1994).
These issues are more acute for media education than they are for more conventional academic subjects. Teachers’ attempts to impose cultural, moral, or political authority over the media that children experience in their daily lives are unlikely to be taken seriously. They are often based on a paternalistic contempt for children’s tastes and pleasures and are bound to be rejected. The notion that students might be somehow weaned off what they perceive as their own popular culture in favor of the teacher’s cultural or political values would seem to be increasingly impossible. Even where teachers have sought more positive engagements with students’ media cultures, they have often sought to colonize students for their own purposes. In the process they frequently end up re-inscribing traditional notions of what counts as valid knowledge (Buckingham, 2003).

Media educators have addressed some of these issues in recent years. Teachers have increasingly recognized that media education should not be a crusade to rescue children from the media. Protectionist approaches to media education — whether cultural, moral, or political — are now seen by many as redundant, if not positively counter-productive (Buckingham, 2003). Younger teachers, who have grown up with electronic media, are less likely to see themselves as missionaries denouncing the influence of the media and more enthusiastic about young people using media as forms of cultural expression (Morgan, 1998; Richards, 1998).

Nevertheless, media education remains a fundamentally modernist enterprise. Many media educators continue to distrust students’ pleasures in the media. We are wary of sensuality, emotion, and irrationality, and we find it hard to deal with them when they inevitably arise. We are led by a political drive to fix and define meanings and pleasures that can be rationally evaluated and contested. While we are beginning to acknowledge the educational potential of media production, we are often suspicious of the creative play with meaning that it seems to afford.

However, the broadly postmodern developments I have described raise some important new questions for media educators. The heterogeneous media environment in which young people are now growing up poses a challenge for the identity politics (e.g., of gender and ethnicity) that continue to inform contemporary media education, and for its realist conceptions of representation. It may also create the space for more playful forms of pedagogy that engage directly with young people’s emotional investments in the media and with their sense of agency. In this article, I suggest that there are significant possibilities for teachers to engage with these developments, particularly through students’ media production. I also 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 learned it. As such, my arguments may well be seen to 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, which inevitably complicates the task of media educators. It places significant limits on what we can possibly know about students’ experiences with media, and on how relevant our teaching can be. Alongside the accessible common culture of broadcast television, young people now face a vast proliferation of media options, many of which may be unavailable or at least incomprehensible to teachers. We can no longer assume that our students will share similar experiences with one another, let alone that they might do so with us. Further, we can no longer trust in a simplistic account of the impact of the media on identity, where media images have singular and predictable consequences on students’ perceptions of their place in the world.

While media teachers clearly need to keep pace with the enthusiasms of their students, they cannot and should not hope to know more than they do. Indeed, in my experience, personal preferences and investment in various media can easily be a liability in the classroom. Students are likely to reject what teachers enjoy, particularly if that is made clear to them (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994). Yet the differences in media experiences between teachers and students are not simply a matter of taste or of ritualistic claims and counter-claims. They may also have more far-reaching implications for the theoretical assumptions that inform our teaching.

A good example of this is in teaching about representation, one of the “key concepts” of media education in the U.K. (Buckingham, 2003). Reflecting on her own teaching, Elizabeth Funge (1998) notes 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 feminism in the 1970s, with its emphasis on ideological deconstruction, simply fails to connect with contemporary gender politics — as embodied, for example, in the notion of “girl power” taken up by the Spice Girls, among others. Analyzing “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” (1998, p. 17). We can extend these arguments by considering more recent representations of female sexuality — like Buffy the Vampire Slayer; Xena, Warrior Princess; or Sex in the City — that seem to combine a heightened form of “objectification” of the body with a powerful celebration of agency.

The implication is not just that media educators need to engage with their students’ changing media experiences. They also need to recognize 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 interact with them — the modalities of interpretation, engagement, and investment — are also fundamentally changed. Funge (1998) 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 recognize that media representations are more complex, and audiences more sophisticated and autonomous, than in earlier times. Contemporary representations of gender cannot be encompassed by outdated notions of stereotyping, negative images, and the male gaze. However, as Funge argues, it is precisely these kinds of ideas that continue to circulate in media education.

The argument Judith Williamson (1981/1982) raises partly reflects a concern about the lack of connection between ideological analysis and lived experience, although Funge (1998) also raises the important question about where any of this leaves the boys in her class. The more challenging question is whether young people now define and construct their gender identities in a different way from previous generations, and how they use the media in doing so. Although the evidence is difficult to establish, some feminist commentators on contemporary youth culture suggest there is such a difference (McRobbie, 1994). Indeed, some feminist theorists have challenged the very notion of a fixed or essential gender identity, arguing that gender is a kind of performance or “masquerade” (Butler, 1990). Of course, the figure of Madonna has become the best-known popular icon of this postmodern version of femininity (Schwichtenberg, 1993).

Even if we accept these arguments, it is debatable whether we can extend them to other areas of identity formation. There have been 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 apply to other areas of identity formation such as “race” and ethnicity is questionable. Some commentators celebrate what they see as the emergence of powerful Black personalities and characters and more hybrid “new ethnicities” in the media. But the continuing presence of racist rhetoric and assumptions is hard to ignore (Hall & du Gay, 1996; Mercer, 1994), and the implications for identity politics and for education remain unlikely to be straightforward.

Phil Cohen (1998) offers some useful reflections on questions of identity and ethnicity 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 that regards racism merely as resulting from irrationality or misinformation. Like Funge (1998), he argues that images can be read in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways, and that the meanings attached to a notion like “race” are inherently unstable. For Cohen, a more constructive starting point would be to recognize the elements of “masquerade,” such as parody, mimicry, and playful juxtaposition, that characterize some contemporary youth cultures. He also suggests that these can be
used by students to subvert essentialized ethnic identities and to generate more complex narratives of the self. His example, an image of an “Indian Cowgirl Warrior,” created and originated by an ethnically mixed group of seven- and eight-year-old girls, is a distinctly hybrid multicultural creation that gives voice to their resistance to racial injustice.

Behind both Cohen’s (1998) and Funge’s (1998) studies 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 the seeming ideological delusions promoted by the mainstream media. The studies 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 miss much of the positive political potential of students’ media cultures.

Playful Pedagogies

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 nonrational, the bodily, and the erotic are fundamental dimensions of social experience that are often disavowed. However, Silverstone argues that popular culture has always offered an arena for play in which they can be sanctioned, if only temporarily. In the electronic media we can find the same marked spaces for play, but the boundaries between play and seriousness may become more permeable and less distinct. Play, as Silverstone 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 favor an irreverent play with meaning, in which seriousness and rationality are replaced by irony and parody. According to Robin Usher and Richard Edwards (1994), “serious” modern culture aims to give a “truthful” representation of reality and thus educate people into viewing the world in particular ways that are conducive to “progress.” This view of culture relies on the notion of mastery through rationality and on the denial or suppression of desire. By contrast, postmodern culture subverts these totalizing 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 to an oppressive modernist status quo, while others argue that it is here that postmodernism most clearly displays its complicity with contemporary consumer culture (Best & Kellner, 1991; Jameson, 1992).

As I have indicated, media production provides a space for students to explore their pleasures and emotional investments in ways that are more subjec-
tive and playful than with critical analysis. Of course, production is itself often pleasurable, partly because of its collaborative nature; being part of a team, sharing your work with peers, having a laugh, dressing up, and enjoying jokes are absolutely central to the activity. At the same time, there is a sense that many production projects reflect a kind of subversion or transgression of the rules of serious educational endeavor. As we shall see, this can have difficult consequences.

These playful dimensions of media education have been more successfully realized with younger children. In the context of literacy teaching, the works of Anne Haas Dyson (1997) and Rebekah Willett (2001) provide interesting insights into children’s use of media and popular culture in their creative writing. In the classroom Dyson describes, children engaged in “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 superhero cartoons in their writing became a means of defining and enacting their social identities. It also became a focus of tension between the official culture of the school and the unofficial culture of the children’s everyday lives.

Willett’s (2001) study focuses similarly 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 musical groups like the Spice Girls, computer games like _GoldenEye_, 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 where particular friendships and broader aspects of social identity, including gender, are being negotiated and defined. 5

In different ways, both authors address teacher’s anxieties surrounding children’s use of media. Willett (2001) shows that boys’ media enthusiasm is less easily adapted to the preferred conventions of school writing than girls’. Boys are also more likely to provoke moralistic concerns about violence. Dyson attempts to “recover” aspects of popular culture by comparing superhero cartoons to ancient Greek myths. She also subjects the texts from which the children draw — _X-Men, The Three Ninjas, Power Rangers_ — to some rather summary ideological judgments of her own about both violence and stereotyping.

5 Other studies in this vein may be found in Marsh (1999) and Dyson (1999). See also Dyson in this volume.
Donna Grace and Joseph Tobin’s (1998) study of video production in an elementary school in Hawaii addresses these ideological dimensions of children’s relations with popular culture in a more direct way. Here, the open-ended invitation to produce videotapes resulted in children’s frequent transgressions of 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, including children’s cartoons, family movies, horror films, and “taboo” programs 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 allowed what the authors call “a place for pleasure” (1998, p. 43), where the children’s humor and everyday interests could be recognized in the classroom. At the same time, several of the videos clearly and apparently self-consciously violated the norms of political correctness. Their 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 “carnivalesque” approach allows such differences to be represented and addressed, rather than ignored or wished 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; none describes the actual teaching process in any detail. The primary aim of the activity for Willett (2001) and Dyson (1997) is to encourage creative writing rather than to develop children’s understanding of the media. For Grace and Tobin (1998) 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, few media production activities in schools are as apparently open-ended as those I have just described. In the context of media education in the U.K., the aims of production work are nearly always defined in conceptual terms (Buckingham, 2003; Buckingham, Grahame, & Sefton-Green, 1995).
Production is generally seen as a concrete way of exploring issues having to do with representation, institutions, and audiences. Such activities often take the form of tightly structured simulations or exercises. Nevertheless, production is an arena in which teachers necessarily cede some control to students, and what the students choose to do with that control is not always to teachers’ 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 recognized as politically incorrect. As I discuss, the political consequences of this are often complex and problematic.

Media educators have frequently expressed concern about the dangers of student productions simply imitating mainstream media (e.g., Ferguson, 1981; Masterman, 1985). Such authors seem to assume that if students imitate dominant forms they will somehow imbibe the ideologies that those forms seem to contain. Yet such arguments are based on rather simplistic assumptions about the ways that students read and use the media, and they seem to ignore much of what actually goes on in student productions.

Where imitation does occur, it 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 recognize that their own work is unlikely to be as polished or authentic as the “real thing,” and rather than risking failure they are more comfortable passing off their production as parody. Play-acting in a group is also a potentially uncomfortable situation, therefore it is often easier to exaggerate for comic effect. Parody can also provide a useful way to deal with the ideological imperatives of teachers, since it allows students to use dominant forms while simultaneously disavowing any commitment to them.

In these respects, 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 considered a matter of authorial intention, it also depends crucially on the reader’s judgment. If the reader does not recognize the signals of parodic intention or the difference between the original and the parody, this may have problematic consequences, as we will see. It is not clear how far we can trust what the author says about the work, since the claim to parody can function as a post hoc rationalization or justification. Parody potentially offers a freedom in which nobody can be held accountable for what they say. These ambiguities may be particularly difficult when authors are students and readers are their teachers.

Two of my own research studies point to some of the difficulties that can arise when students employ parody. The first was part of a broader project described in detail elsewhere (Buckingham et al., 1995). One of the productions, created by six 14-year-old boys, was a trailer for a situation comedy about a group of ill-matched characters sharing an apartment. The characters were perceived by the students as crude stereotypes: a violent man-hating feminist,
a gay child molester, a Greek macho man, and a freeloading “slut.” While some members of the class objected (as did some teachers) about its appropriateness for the target audience (11-year-olds), students quickly swept aside the objections. Indeed, one of the leading students in the group dismissed them as a form of censorship.

The most significant problem the group had to negotiate 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 humor 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 the students were primarily seeking to outrage were the teachers and the wider institution of the school. This became particularly clear when the feminist character was given the same surname as the male classroom 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 (Britzman, 1991).

However, it would be a mistake to justify this kind of work through some simple-minded notion of resistance. The leaders of this group were unashamedly homophobic and explained the inclusion of the predatory gay character on the basis that they all “hated gays.” The situation with the Greek character was more complex, because the boy who devised and played him was also from a Greek background. While he strongly resisted the accusation that this portrayal was racist, it could certainly be seen as a kind of disavowal of some aspects of his own ethnicity. One of the most significant difficulties, however, was the students’ ability to co-opt the arguments that one might have used to challenge them. In their written accounts, they described the show as stereotyped and even politically incorrect, and ultimately they 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 program represented their own views. The ambiguous nature of the production — as simultaneously fictional and real — effectively enabled them to subvert the teacher’s ideological imperatives while simultaneously conforming to the requirements of the task.

A second study raised similar contradictions and dilemmas (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994). Slutropolitan was a systematic parody of the women’s magazine Cosmopolitan produced by four 17-year-old girls in another London school in their media studies coursework. The magazine included sixteen full-color pages. The front cover was based on a photograph of cleavage adorned with an antinuclear pendant; an ad for “Tina’s Tights” showed a shot of legs clad in “tarty” fishnets; and the back cover advertised the chocolate bar “Flake,” using traditional fellatio style. Inside there were a number of problem pages, including “Dear Doreen,” which dealt with “the dreaded broken nail”; “Clare’s Clever Cookery Page,” which described how to cook frozen peas, illus-
trated 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 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 humor, and the shared sense of “having a laugh.” This production also 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: for some it was the magazines, but for others it was the readership. Some thought the parodic target was the conventional media representation of the “slut,” while others thought it was the real “sluts” themselves. The project functioned on several levels at once, from the point of view of its creators and from ours 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 recognize (and indulge) the otherness in themselves. By enacting “sluttish” behavior, the girls displayed their sexuality (or a construction of their sexuality) in a semipublic 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, the postmodern feminist perspective identified above would regard this as a celebration and deconstruction of the feminine masquerade. From this position, gender is seen not just as a form of behavior or a personal attribute, but as a form of parody (Butler, 1990). However, even the most explicitly “feminist” of the students (a label they would probably all have refused) would not have conceptualized the politics of their project in this way.

While such work offers a valuable alternative to the dryly rationalistic emphases of some aspects of media education, it also poses some difficulties. Simply celebrating the pleasure of such work as a form of subversion or transgression of dominant norms fails to recognize that it can also reinforce existing inequalities and forms of oppression. These kinds of production activities do offer students different positions in relation to the authority of the teacher and the school. Ultimately, however, it would be too much to claim that they empower students, whatever we take that to mean (Ellsworth, 1989). It is difficult to ascertain what kind of learning might be happening here, and how that learning relates 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 on 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) addresses several of these ideological and pedagogic concerns in her investigation of 16- and 17-year-old students’ work on the theme of horror. In some respects, horror could be seen as an extreme test case, since its appeal clearly bypasses attempts at intellectual rationalization. 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 protectionism, for example, in addressing the “problem” of media violence. On the contrary, she suggests that there are positive grounds for teaching about horror, which are most apparent 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 like 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. His victims are helpless elderly women who are implicitly regarded as dispensable. Lauren’s production could undoubtedly be read merely as a reproduction of the patriarchal values of the slasher movie, in which men victimize powerless women. Yet Bragg argues that the contemporary horror genre cannot be reduced to simplistic formulae, such as violence or misogyny, and finds that Lauren’s work displays a self-conscious control of its conventions that is far from unthinking imitation.

More significantly, Bragg suggests that the experience of production enabled Lauren to work through 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 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 because the murders can only be committed through the agency of the white gloves. Bragg argues that the production offered Lauren shifting forms of identification with both the killer and the victims, and it allowed her to be a distanced viewer as the director of the piece. The production allowed her to step outside of identities typically available to her, as a young woman and as a student, and it allowed her to take up new relationships with those around her, even if only temporarily.

A second example, Richard’s scenario and trailer for his film *18 with a Bullet*, features a group of teenagers in the middle of the woods being systematically killed by a psychopathic killer who, in the closing sequence, is himself
killed by a large bear. This scenario also shows a confident grasp of horror conventions, particularly those of the gory “splatter movie.” Again, Bragg argues that the scenario and the trailer should not be seen merely as exercises in genre because they enable Richard to explore unacknowledged fantasies of male masochism. Richard’s essay about the film 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 occurs.

Neither of these productions is explicitly parodic in the manner of Slutmopolitan, but they display a similar degree of control on generic conventions. As such, they offer much that could form the basis for more explicit reflection and analysis. However, Bragg’s argument moves beyond such rationalistic aspirations. Attempting to assess such work merely in terms of what it tells us about students’ conceptual understanding is inevitably reductive; forcing students to reflect 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 deeper psychic tensions. She directly challenges the notion that students speak with a singular, authentic voice, and disputes the idea that they should be held accountable for what they say with it.

Ultimately, Bragg’s account takes us beyond the modernist paradigm in which most accounts of media education are situated. 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 that teachers should be perpetually monitoring their students’ moral or ideological progress and forcing them into the mode of the dutiful student.

So where does this argument lead? Following John Shotter (1993) and Sue Turnbull (1998), Bragg (2000) calls for a greater emphasis on the “practical-moral knowledge” that is embedded in 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 it depends on the judgments of others and is the kind of knowledge that can only come from within a specific social situation. From this ethical perspective, responsibility for making cultural, moral, or ideological judgments cannot lie with teachers alone; students must be able to work with what they have and who they are, rather than in terms of an idealized student identity that teachers might like them to adopt.

Conclusion

In the instances I have discussed in this article, young people seem to be engaging in new forms of learning that implicitly call into question the theoreti-
cal or critical knowledge that media educators have traditionally promoted. They seem to be developing more playful — perhaps postmodern — conceptions of knowledge and learning that move beyond the limitations of the traditional, rationalistic academic mode.

Nevertheless, these studies also raise important challenges. In bringing popular culture into the classroom, we inevitably bring with it a whole range of desires and experiences that are often left unspoken in schools; and where they are spoken, they are often policed out of existence. The fact that this is inevitable does not make it any less uncomfortable. Teachers have a responsibility to make the classroom a functioning and mutually respectful community. They have the right to prevent behavior that they believe may disrupt this responsibility. But merely attempting to censor what we believe to be politically or morally unacceptable, or subjecting it to a form of critical analysis that does little more than command obedience and assent, is bound to prove counterproductive. To this extent, the validity of the postmodernist critique of media education is hard to deny.

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 be at best superficial; at worst it could be seen to represent a form of complicity with the assertions of young people’s consumer sovereignty so enthusiastically promoted by the media industries. There are significant constraints on young people’s autonomy as users of media and on their diversity of experience. The media are inextricably tied up in broader networks of social, economic, and institutional power, and it is vital that young people understand the complex and sometimes contradictory ways these operate.

As such, I argue that media education cannot afford to abandon the modernist project of cultural criticism. However, it does need to reformulate that project in a way that builds the new potential of postmodern culture and the modalities of engagement that media offer young people. Media production may have a particularly important role, as it seems to provide a means for students to explore and reflect their changing positions in contemporary media culture. It allows a space for play, in which unspeakable desires can be spoken and totalizing discourses transgressed and undermined. However, it may be ultimately misleading to suggest that these dimensions of play and rationality are necessarily opposed. 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. In order to do so, they will need to develop a metalanguage, a form of critical discourse in which to describe and analyze 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


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