Revisiting the Popular Arts: Media Education, Cultural Values and Cultural Production

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In The Routledge International Handbook of Media Literacy Education, edited by Belinha S. De Abreu, Paul Mihailidis, Alice Y. L. Lee, Jad Melki and Julian McDougall

The problem of cultural value

The question of cultural value has had a vexed history over the lifetime of media education. The championship of popular culture by media educators is almost taken for granted now, and it is easy to forget the intellectual struggle to defend this position. A landmark text in this struggle was Hall and Whannel's *The Popular Arts* (1965), which made the case for the serious study of popular culture in schools, against the background of an NUT conference resolution condemning it.[1] The contradictions contained in Hall and Whannel's "left-Leavisite" stance are clearly outlined by John Storey (2014), who captures the tensions between their efforts to promote the teaching of popular culture for its own sake, and their abiding conviction that distinctions of value can be made, both between popular and elite culture and, more pertinently for their argument, within popular culture itself. The contrast they memorably make is between pop music and jazz, which involves an overt judgment of value applied generally across those genres.

Storey's position is to emphasize the significance of Hall and Whannel's recognition of legitimate cultural value in popular culture (or at least some aspects of it), the importance of young people's agency as an audience, and the value to be found in pop music as an expressive form well-suited to teenage emotional life. This evaluation of Hall and Whannel's case, however, allows for a side-stepping of the question of cultural value, and a shifting of the emphasis from intrinsic value to the importance of audience tastes, pleasures and contingent uses and interpretations. Arguably, the question of cultural value and its relation to aesthetics remains unresolved.

My aim in this chapter is to ask what significance Hall and Whannel's case might have for media education in the early twenty-first century, and apply the possible answers to two examples of classroom practice drawn from recent research projects. There is certainly a case for following Storey's line of thought. It gets us off the hook to approach cultural value in media education as purely a matter of audience taste, and to abandon any attempt at distinctions of cultural value beyond that. However, my hunch is that cultural valuations beyond those of individual or group taste still remain in media education, in both overt and

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[1] A 1961 conference of the National Union of Teachers contained a motion condemning the effects of popular media on young people. For an extended discussion of the reaction to this, including that of Hall and Whannel, see Bolas (2009).

covert forms. An obvious example of overt claims for intrinsic cultural value exists in film education, which although distinct in many ways from media education, is in practice embedded within it—certainly in the U.K., and particularly in the media arts approach that I want to explore here. Of course, to promote the cultural values of art-house film and national film heritage *at the expense of popular cinema* collides with the championship of popular culture at the heart of media education, and I would certainly oppose this. However, I would also oppose the inverse practice. The ideal position is to seek the best of both worlds, although this certainly involves complex forms of cultural negotiation between teachers and students.

More generally, it seems likely that the selection of texts and topics is itself a form of cultural evaluation in less overt ways. Teachers are, in my view, likely to select texts that they feel are valuable, whether as affective or intellectual experiences, as rich audiovisual experiences, or as expressions of valuable messages. Some time ago a U.K. survey indicated that film was the dominant medium of choice for media studies teachers in the U.K. (QCA, 2005), which certainly suggests that some kind of cultural distinction is at work. The ideal is to choose texts and topics in consultation with students, and many practitioners and theorists advocate this (e.g., McDougall, 2006). Such negotiation is helpful for students, and it allows for the kinds of open debate about cultural value proposed in this chapter. However, even in such negotiations, it would be odd if the teacher was unable to introduce students to new experiences, and such expansion of cultural horizons necessarily involves selection.

Before looking at specific examples, I want to explore the theory of cultural value beyond the proposals of Hall and Whannel, in the wider context of cultural studies and their early history in the U.K. One of the originating conceptions of popular culture is Raymond Williams's model of "common" culture (1961). Although this conception is familiar and enormously influential, not least in shaping the development of models for media education (e.g., Buckingham, 2003), it is sometimes forgotten that Williams's argument in "The Analysis of Culture" (one of the essays in *The Long Revolution*) proposes a threefold model of cultural categories that analysts should consider: the *ideal*, *documentary* and *social* definitions of culture. These definitions correspond in many ways to the three levels of culture that Williams proposes later in the essay: the *selective tradition*, *recorded culture* and *lived culture*.

Although the cultural studies movement has largely built on the *social definition* and on the level of *lived culture*, these three definitions and levels are in many ways co-dependent. Williams's intent in identifying of the *selective tradition* is to counter the Leavisite dogma that a select canon of texts has transcendental intrinsic value, and instead to argue that the elevation of these texts emerges from successive interpretative valuations by social, political and cultural elites. This argument is a similar to that of Bourdieu—that the universal values claimed by Kant for particular manifestations of the beautiful (and sublime) are in fact the partial preferences of a particular social class (Bourdieu, 1984; Kant, 1790/1952).

There is, then, a dynamic relation between elite/selective culture and popular/common culture. If the traditional power of the "high arts"—opera, ballet, classical music, fine art or

classical theatre—retain distinct forms of cultural influence, funding, or academic and journalistic recognition, then we can also say that the cultural forms of soap opera, popular music, popular cinema and even videogames are hardly invisible or undervalued in our twenty-first century cultural landscape. We can also point out, without acceding entirely to the postmodernist proposal, that the boundaries between popular and elite forms are increasingly, and productively, blurred. As productions of Shakespeare merge with the MTV aesthetic, as the filmwork of Eisenstein is set to synthpop music, as videogames adapt canonical literary texts, so the formerly well-policed cultural borders relax. The difficulty—which is a real challenge for education—is that not all people are equally able to cross these borders. The familiar binary distinction between "elite" and "ordinary," and its association with Marxist (and, for cultural studies, Gramscian) formulations of dominant and subordinate social fractions, has given way to more complex conceptions of social class, in which cultural capital and the economic or social advantages it confers can be attained by an expanded, multilayered middle class (Savage, 2015). Similarly, the image of the cultural omnivore (Warde, Wright, & Gayo-Cal, 2007) reminds us that, in this new age of cultural pick'n'mix, the more advantaged classes gain the benefits of ranging across the old elite-popular divide in their cultural consumption. Meanwhile, the most disadvantaged sector, termed the "precariat" (precarious proletariat) by Savage (following Standing, 2014), enjoys no such expansion of opportunity. Instead, it is more aggressively excluded. The onus, then, is on education, as the only cultural program that is delivered to the entire population, to level the playing-field and to give all young people at least some experience of the ways that such border-raiding can expand cultural experience, promote personal pleasure and make new meanings possible.

In these social processes, whether they happen in society at large or in the more managed context of education, the questions of cultural value and how we construct it remain elusive and covert. Williams's proposal of the *selective tradition* suggests that it would be valuable for schools to promote open scrutiny of the social processes through which such preferences have been established over time. In this way, media texts can be scrutinized from a historical angle. How do popular horror films such as *Bride of Frankenstein* (Whale, 1935) or *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) become revered classics of film art? How does yesterday's kitsch become today's acknowledged masterpiece? Film education is interestingly positioned in relation to cultural value. Unlike media education, which champions the popular wholeheartedly, film education is conflicted in this respect. On the one hand, it is impelled to value the film heritages of the nations in which it is practised, especially in Europe (Reid, Burn, & Wall, 2013). On the other hand, film educators often recognize the value of popular cinema, not least in relation to their students' cultural experiences and tastes.

These examples remind us that it is not only the cultural artifacts of the *selective tradition* that have been picked out and polished over time. Popular culture does not spring fully formed from nowhere. Williams's model reminds us again of the history behind popular culture. His category of *documentary culture* suggests that, although we cannot live past cultures that have died, we can archaeologically retrieve them, or elements of them. In his later work, Williams further distinguishes, between "archaic" and "residual" culture, where the "archaic" consists effectively of dead relics that have no dynamic meaning in the present,

and the "residual" elements still have live meanings in our own time, which can be actively developed (Williams, 1977). Williams's examples of past cultures are often those of classical civilizations; so we might imagine a distinction between Greco-Roman artifacts that are of interest only to archaeologists, and classical narratives that have been revived in today's media cultures, such as the Spartans and Persians at Thermopylae as re-imagined in the film *300* (Snyder, 2007).

However, the distinction here is not simply a matter of neglecting or reclaiming the distant past. The past is a spectrum, and the historical process of cultural transformation and reconstruction is constant. For the secondary school students I taught many years ago, *Alien* (Scott, 1979) was a startlingly new, explosive movie. For those I taught ten years later, the film seemed tame and slow. Similarly, the media educator Pete Fraser makes a case, in relation to the teaching of pop videos through production, for asking students to design videos of popular music from the 1960s, on the grounds that this exercise provides some critical distance from the musical culture in which the students are immersed (Fraser, 2005). We could suggest that this kind of work involves an archaeological transformation of a residual culture.

My argument so far, then, is that in following Williams's categories, three proposals can be made in relation to media education and cultural value.

First, media education should promote the serious study of popular culture, taking for granted its equity with elite culture in terms of its cultural value.

Second, such education should promote critical investigation of the *selective tradition*, or the historical process through which judgments of cultural value are formed. A particularly productive approach to this could be to explore how the most elevated of canonical texts (for example, Shakespeare) can be transformed in popular media (as explored in one of the examples discussed below).

Third, media education should encourage "media archaeology," in which students investigate earlier cultural moments, retrieve artifacts that were valued at other times, and transform them through production practices.

In the spirit of Williams's argument, it is important to emphasize that these various approaches should not be disconnected, but should be closely related. Although the level of *lived culture* corresponds to Williams's *social definition*, he is clear that all of the levels and approaches that he advocates are social.

These three proposals, however, do not provide the whole answer to the question of cultural value. Williams, like Hall and Whannel, represents a radical departure from the cultural values of Leavisite literary studies through his determination to champion popular culture. Yet both Williams and Hall and Whannel make distinctions of value within the realm of popular culture. Williams draws the line at horror films and sings the praises of jazz music; Hall and Whannel compare pop music unfavorably with jazz. The arguments presented here are not framed in terms of socially formed cultural tastes, but in terms of the intrinsic merits

of the cultural forms themselves. For Williams and Hall and Whannel, horror films and pop music are simply bad.

We might dismiss such judgments as a residue of earlier tastes, or an intrusion of the authors' own tastes into the argument. We could, on that basis, locate the investigation of cultural value purely in the realm of taste, confining it to the critical study of media audiences. However, to do so would be to close down the debate about media aesthetics beyond the realm of taste in media education, and this is the debate I address in the following section.

Rhetoric and poetics

My argument is that media education can both maintain a critical approach to the politics of the media, and attend to media aesthetics. Media education must help students view these two domains as interdependent.

Media education has always been a form of critical practice, as in the forms of "critical literacy" propounded today. Such practice encourages students to question "who constructs the texts whose representations are dominant in a particular culture at a particular time; how readers come to be complicit with the persuasive ideologies of texts; [and] whose interests would be served by such representations and such readings …" (Morgan, 1997, p. 2).

This practice of questioning is a primary strength of media education. Such practice can be seen as a rhetorical tradition, beginning with Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and developing into the rhetorical studies of today, which critically analyze political messages and the persuasive techniques they use. For Aristotle, the art of rhetoric falls into three categories: *ethos* (the ethical context, emphasizing the intentions of the speaker); *logos* (the substance of the spoken text); and *pathos* (the emotional engagement of the audience). I mention these ancient categories because they are still with us. The production regime in which a media text is generated, the structure of the text itself and the reception regime in which audiences engage with the text—these three categories are fundamental to contemporary conceptions regarding the cultural exchange of meanings in cultural studies (du Gay, Hall, Janes, & Mackay, 1996). These categories are also fundamental to the conceptual framework applied by media educators—the bedrock of the critical understanding that students are expected to acquire (Buckingham, 2003).

There is a history of unease among media educators, however, about what happens when this critical approach becomes isolated from the pleasures of engaging with the media or the creative enjoyment of media production. In public school examinations in the U.K. (at the GCSE and A Level), conceptual and critical understanding is often assessed through written essays, which analyze media texts or evaluate the students' own production work. It is all too easy for such written work to become a decontextualized, dutiful rehearsal of what the student imagines the teacher or examiner wants to hear (Buckingham, Sefton-Green & Fraser, 2000). Many teachers have felt that part of the solution to this problem is a closer integration between creative work and critical understanding. Such an integration seems ideal, and this is an approach I support. However, there is a lurking danger. If the creative work is, in the end, done purely in the service of critical conceptual understanding, then it is both limiting and

narrowly developmental. If we compare such creative work to the work of adult media artists, it is clear that no media practitioner ever makes a film, animation or videogame as a means to better understand the political economy of the media, or the structure of media texts, or the tastes of media audiences. Such an idea would be absurd. Rather, the acquisition of such concepts serves the purpose of the creative act. The question remains, then, what is this purpose?

Where media education has emphasized the rhetorical approach, education in the arts (including literature) has tended to focus much more on a tradition descended from another of Aristotle's works: the *Poetics*. In other words, the arts have been primarily focused on developing attention to aesthetic form, whether in visual design, dance, drama or music. Art educators inherit an extensive vocabulary for describing the aesthetic features of painting, drawing and sculpture: the vocabulary of line, color, composition. They inherit a consensus about the signifying possibilities of these forms, including the evocations of emotion that these forms can accomplish.

This vocabulary is less well-developed in media education. In general, students are encouraged to critically interrogate the political or ideological properties of the text (including the texts they make themselves), rather than to question the text's aesthetic properties.

For the sake of the argument, if arts educators can learn from the rhetorical approach of media education, then media educators can learn from the poetics of the arts. Educators can develop a *poetics* of the media.

A provisional definition of media aesthetics

Up to this point, I have skirted around the problem of defining "aesthetics" and "poetics." If an approach that is entirely confined to the relativism of taste leaves us with nothing to say about the intrinsic aesthetic properties of media texts, and if the Kantian "pure gaze" critiqued by Bourdieu is beset by the perils of class distinction, then what else is there? I intend to develop my ideas through the exploration of two examples; but briefly, the components of aesthetics and poetics are as follows:

- **DESIGN: The aesthetic merits of composition and design. These merits can be associated with the artisanal creativity of Heidegger's *techne* (1954/1977), moving beyond the more instrumental technologies of production to something that creates a claim to truth, which we can conceive as socially negotiated.**
- **MATERIALITY: Aristotle's original view of *aesthesis* as sense-perception is almost the reverse of the abstracted "pure gaze" of the Kantian aesthetic. The function of artwork for representing, materializing and engaging with sensory experience can be associated with a phenomenological understanding of subjective experience, and as in semiotics, with an emphasis on the materiality of the sign and the provenance of its signifier material (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).**

- **TASTE: The politics of taste, in Bourdieu's sense, functions to mediate the first two components.**

These three aspects of aesthetics and poetics are interdependent. The poetics of the media (and the aesthetics of the arts in general) cannot be dissociated from the structural mechanics of design, in which a satisfying or beautiful pattern (or a strategic contestation of this) serves to convey meanings that are both cognitive and affective. At the same time, the embodied, material nature of artistic practice and signification cannot be avoided. If the design is the skeleton, then the material object is its flesh. Finally, the regimes of both the production and the reception of an artwork subject the design and its materiality to the contingencies of taste and the discursive processes through which it develops, subject to the cultural experience conferred by social class, education, peer communities and so on. These processes, which are dialogic across time and across contemporary cultural landscapes, are indivisible from the production and interpretation of meaning.

Debating cultural value: Films v. videogames

The following example illustrates how the poetics of the media relate to cultural taste. The example I use comes from a funded research project to study the learning progression of media literacy in two U.K. secondary schools and five of their partner primary schools.[2] The project applied largely qualitative methods (observation, interview, collection of student media work) to gather its data over three years. In this example, six 15-year-old students in a GCSE Media Studies class are discussing the differences between films and videogames.

> Mark: I think it is like a film.
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> Rachel: I don't think it is like a film at all. Like, in a video game it is always a set story. Much as the creators make you think you're making your own choices, you always end up with the same narrative as when you started. Whereas in a movie it's completely different. It's so much more realistic because of the graphics and the real people and the settings. Like London, and it's more scary cos you know that place. Whereas in a video game it's just all animated, and just like—d'you know what I mean, it's not real …
>
> Mark: In film, though, like you have the main character, who goes on a journey or whatever, in a horror film they meet the—
>
> Rachel: You could say that the other way round. You could say that a horror movie has all the components of a videogame, but, er, a horror film has more—
>
> …
>
> Grace: Rachel, you know you said that the videogames, that the videogames have your own narrative [indec.]? Surely a film has—you can't change the narrative of a

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film, a film's going to be the same no matter whether you watch it, but you're playing the videogame?

Rachel: Sorry, you weren't here when we [indec.], I was reflecting back on [laughter] … I agree with what you're saying, but I was reflecting back on the point how Mark was like, um, it's like you're inside the story and you don't know what's going to happen next.

Grace: I think that's a bit like—you mean for a videogame?

Rachel: In a videogame.

Grace: Yeah you are. But you're more so for a videogame, cos you're the one controlling it. You can't control a film.

Rachel: No, but that's different, because then like in a film, because the person, you can't help them, like in a game, you can like—

Mark: Yeah, you feel sorry for them, but you can't [indec.]

Rachel: So you, you're like, well I don't, but you didn't actually, whereas in the film you feel like it's an actual person … If you die in a video game you can just start again. In a movie—

Alice: No, cos you don't actually die when—like if you think, in a movie the character's actually dead.

Rachel: Like, "Oh my God, what's going to happen next?"

Alice: In a film the character actually dies.

Mark: Narrative is the same in a film, no matter how many times you watch it or where you watch it—in a game it, well, yeah it's the same thing, but—

Rachel: Am I right in saying that all horror movies, er, all horror videogames have roughly the same story?

R2: You've got to the point, I think, where you need to talk about actual examples.

Mark: I'm just saying that every game's different—

Rachel: But I imagine that they all have the same structure …

...

Grace: With a video game, it's down to your personality, how you react with it, like there isn't a set reaction with videogames.

Jack: I think that's true because—

Rachel: I agree with you [to Grace], because the characters are real, they aren't animated!

R1: Jack, say what you were about to say, but if you can think of an example, give an example as well.

Jack: I say you are more connected to the character in a video game, because it is you, because you're controlling it completely. You control all directions.

Rachel: I agree with Jack that you're probably more connected to the character, but you don't feel love for them! I think that in a movie, in a movie, it's more about how can we scare the audience—let's think about lighting, let's think about setting, let's think about all of these things—

Jack: They do the same with videogames—

Alice: And you do all like that with camera angles, you're the one controlling them, it's you controlling where you look.

Mark: In games, you can change your view—in games, you can change the view by what they're controlling [?]

MC [teacher]: We need to put it to the test.

This discussion raises a number of questions about media aesthetics. The students are discussing narrative structure (how the player can to some extent control a game narrative, but a film viewer cannot); generic formula (whether horror games are reductively composed around the same narrative); modality, in the social semiotic sense of a truth-claim (whether animated characters and environments in games are less "real" than those in live-action film); text-audience affective relations (whether you feel more for the characters in games or in films); and point-of-view (to some extent controlled via player-character camera in games).

A first point to make is that these aspects of the students' discussion relate to the first category proposed in the previous section: *design*. The students are arguing the case for their cultural preferences in relation to the work that these texts perform with their viewers and players: affective engagement, narrative negotiation, and apprehension of the real and authentic. They go into some detail about the ways in which films and games use their respective compositional mechanics to perform these functions. However, the discussion of the formal properties of the texts is by no means formalistic. This discussion leads directly into a hot debate about how these texts claim different kinds of truth or authenticity: the *aletheia* of Heidegger's argument (Burn, 2016a; Heidegger, 1954/1977). These are aesthetic judgments in the service of social use and meaning, and thus the discussion illustrates the kind of productive event that typifies critical engagement in a media arts classroom (and perhaps any media education classroom). In relation to Williams's arguments, it is pertinent to observe that he presents these three categories not as discrete, relentless structures, but as

inter-dependent approaches: "Thus, 'documentary' analysis will lead out to 'social' analysis, whether in a lived culture, a past period, or in the selective tradition which is itself a social organization" (Williams, 1961, p. 53).

The students' discussion also relates to the second category proposed in the previous section: *materiality*. This theme is not so easy to discern in a discussion as it would be in an actual encounter with a media text, or in a production activity. Still, the students are keenly aware of the ways in which the design features of games and films invite the affective and sensory engagement of the spectator or player. In this respect, the performative work of text and audience together, and the embodied subjectivity of the spectator/player, can be discussed in terms of the phenomenological approach to the material media event, as I have proposed concerning this category.

As a matter of interest, this debate in the classroom was followed immediately by a critical play session of *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009), with one student manipulating the PlayStation 3 controller, and the others commenting on the gameplay tactics. Furthermore, the teacher's inventive decision about the nature of the students' practical coursework was to ask them to make a horror videogame (using the game-authoring software Missionmaker,[3] which also features in the example given below). This game design was to include a live-action film, composed to function as a "cut scene" that would introduce the game through a narrative backstory embedded in the game text. (Missionmaker is capable of integrating video files and playing them within the game environment.) In performing these activities, the students' discussions about how real or authentic the experience of games and films could be was amplified and enacted through physical engagement, performance of body and voice, and virtual embodiment in avatar and game-character form (Burn, 2011).

Finally, the discussion of game and film textual mechanics, and of the performative engagement of the audience, is connected in the students' discussion with the third category that I have proposed: *taste*. The students' argument is intimately connected with their cultural tastes and pleasures. This discussion is particularly passionate, as deep affiliations with the two media, film and game, are strongly felt by Rachel and Mark respectively. There is a struggle in the debate between rational analysis and polemic. The students are trying hard to see the argument from both sides, but at the most heated moments of the debate they resort to caricatures of the other medium. Rachel's repeated assertion that "all horror videogames have roughly the same story," although disingenuously posed as a question, can only be made in the absence of actual examples, as the researcher points out. Rachel's stance appears to be based in a familiar discourse about games as formulaic and derivative. Such a position may be partly derived from the cultural values of her family or social class. The data do not suggest an explanation, so we can only speculate. What is clear, however, is that she deploys general aesthetic arguments to claim the superior cultural value of film. Her judgment is a matter of taste, but it is rationally connected with the respective design features of films and

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[3] A game-authoring software allowing users to make 3-D adventure games by constructing rules and manipulating audiovisual assets. For an extended discussion of game production with Missionmaker, see Burn, 2007; and Buckingham and Burn, 2007.

games, and this connection produces social meanings to do with empathy, agency and pleasure.

Similarly, other students in the group defend games through a series of aesthetic arguments, in particular, the notion of the playability of game narratives. Clearly, these arguments too are deployed in the service of a judgment of cultural value. Again, we have no data to suggest the origins of these cultural affiliations, and we can only speculate about the factors of class and, to some extent, gender, as video games are more hotly defended by boys in this discussion.

How might such a discussion, in all its contingent detail, relate to the very general categories of culture and cultural value proposed by Williams and discussed at the beginning of this chapter?

In very broad terms, we could initially associate the affiliation with film as an aspect of Williams's category of the *selective tradition* (although of course he would have associated film with common, lived culture). The reason for seeing film as part of a selective tradition can be found in the cultural history of film as a form, which at our moment of history is well-established, with its own canons, its distinctions between elite art-forms and popular aesthetics and its entrenchment in national cultural practices as a kind of "heritage" culture. Something of this sense of cultural superiority can be detected in Rachel's discourse in the extract above.

With the same provisionality, we could associate the affiliation with videogames with Williams's category of *lived culture*, which is firmly in the popular cultural terrain, but without the sense of heritage, canon or aesthetic claim, at least in the discourse of these students (though such claims are emerging in academic, journalistic and popular discourse more generally).

Still, these two categories certainly overlap, or at least blur at the edges. For one thing, the weight of history in film and its forms of cultural distinction give way to the lived culture of Rachel and her friends, perhaps rather more so than in the way members of their community could be said to "live" Shakespeare or Homer. Also, the landscape of film culture straddles the elite/popular divide, and indeed often bridges it. Meanwhile, in relation to the younger cultural form of videogames, it is likely that these same kinds of distinction will appear as time goes on. Canons will form, and indeed are already forming (Taylor, 2009).

The example above represents a critical activity in the form of a class discussion. As an aside, we can question the traditional distinction between critical analysis and creative production. Both a critical approach to culture and the creative impulse are closely associated in Williams's view of culture. *The Long Revolution* has adjacent chapters on "The Creative Mind" and "The Analysis of Culture." Furthermore, the practices of critique and creativity in media classrooms often overlap and intermingle (Burn & Durran, 2006). With this in mind, I turn to the nature of creativity in media education. What exactly do we mean by it? How does it function as aesthetic work or as media poetics?

Creativity: Cultural resources, semiotic tools

The role of creativity in education is highly contested (Banaji, Burn, & Buckingham, 2007). My preferred approach draws on the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, for whom the creativity of children is closely related to play (Vygotsky 1931/1998). In playful activity, children learn the meaning of symbolic substitution through manipulating physical objects. Vygotsky's well-known example is a child using a broomstick as an imaginary horse. These symbolic understandings become internalized, and develop into the mental processes which can generate creative work. However, for Vygotsky, true creativity only develops, when the imaginative transformations of play are connected with thinking in concepts: in other words, with rational intellectual processes.

By way of illustration, I will describe an example from a recent research project in which 13-year-old students made videogames based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*,[4] one of the best-known of Shakespeare's plays. It tells the story of the ambitious mediaeval nobleman, Macbeth, and his even more ambitious wife. Spurred on by supernatural prophecies delivered by three witches, the couple plot to kill the king of Scotland, Duncan, and seize the throne. Their success is followed by an increasingly tragic series of consequences, as Macbeth discovers that his grip on power can only be maintained by more bloodshed. He eventually succumbs to the army of Duncan's son, Malcolm.

 The project developed a game-authoring tool specifically for the play in collaboration with Shakespeare's Globe, and tested it with a group of eight students. This was a small qualitative study which used observation, interviews and archiving of student work as the data collection and which evaluated the outcomes through multimodal analysis (Burn, 2016b). The image in Figure 1 shows a screen shot from the editing interface of the software the students are using. In this sequence, which is designed by two girls, the player, as Macbeth, is able to kill King Duncan in his bedchamber.

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[4] "Playful Shakespeare: Games, Drama and Literature in Education." Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2011. PI, Andrew Burn.

FIGURE 1: The design interface in Missionmaker

The students' task is to transform this event in the Macbeth drama into a game: to design a sequence in which the player has choices, multiple routes to follow, challenges to face, resources to meet them and a win-lose state to complete the sequence. To do these things, the students create environments, characters and props, using the pre-rendered assets available within the software.

We can immediately note two points. In relation to Vygotsky's model of creativity, these girls are transforming a set of cultural resources: the words of Shakespeare's play and the visual assets provided by the software (for example, chambers, medieval characters, crowns or daggers). Furthermore, the game-authoring program provides them with various tools. Vygotsky distinguishes between mental (or psychological) tools, and physical (or technological) tools (Wells, 1994). In this case, the mental tools might be various concepts of narrative structure, of space and time or of narrative sequence. The physical tools might be the compositional tools of the software, some of which can be seen in the screenshot in Figure 1. This figure shows the design screen of the Macbeth game as created by the two girls. The large window shows the game world in design state, with the King Duncan character in the background. The transparent cylinder is a "trigger volume" that is invisible to the player. This cylinder is a programmed space with a rule attached that specifies the following:

> *If the Player | enters the trigger volume | King Duncan wakes up.*

The rule editor appears on the bottom left of the image. The rule that is active in the window specifies:

> *If Crown's state | becomes "owned by Player" | Player gets 600 Economy A points.*

The girls have programmed Economy A to be "Ambition," so that the player gains Ambition points (represented on a colored meter in the player interface) after accomplishing particular tasks.

These students have deployed their tools and resources to creatively transform this scene from Shakespeare's play. This activity, then, can be seen in relation to the *design* aspect of aesthetics, as proposed earlier. The use of digital tools such as the rule editor allows the students to craft the game's conditionality and the options for the player's route through the narrative. These are the processes that I have referred to above as *digital aletheia*, or an artisanal manipulation of technology in the interests of developing a claim to truth, which in this case is a combination of a convincing adaptation of Shakespeare's narrative and the production of a satisfying, authentic game experience.

Two further specific examples from this game illustrate related points about the other two aspects of the aesthetic domain, namely *materiality* and *taste*.

The first point is that the two girls have re-ordered some of the temporal elements of the Macbeth play. In their first design session, the girls expressed a particular interest in the play's witches, seeing these as appealing fantasy figures who could be connected with a rich vein of fantasy tales from fairytales and films that they had experienced. According to the actual play, however, the witches do not appear in the scene that the girls were assigned to adapt as a game level. The girls' solution is to bring the witches back into the murder scene, where they work as a reminder to the player of the witches' earlier prophecies and their consequences. These witches also provide the girls with satisfaction through their uncanny presence, which they represent by a combination of three character models from the software: an old woman's head, a female superhero's torso and an alien creature's legs (Figure 2). The software allows the user to recombine the heads, legs and torsos of the character models, as in the popular children's picture books where similar effects are produced by flipping the three sections of the pages. The girls also attach particular special effects to these models: to one, an animation of fire; to another an animation of rain. These elemental attributes, which are not part of the Shakespeare play, nevertheless lend an archaic, magical quality to the characters.

Figure 2: The girls' design of the witches

In addition, the girls' design for the witches incorporates their own voices, making the witches speak prophecies as the models lip-synch the girls' speech. This is the only place in the game where the girls use their own voices. Elsewhere, for Lady Macbeth and King Duncan, they use the pre-recorded voices of professional actors. This choice suggests a particular motivation: to express empathy with the characters they are creating. These creative processes create the material substance of the game: the *materiality* aspect of aesthetic work. Materiality in this case is a multimodal combination of the virtual embodiment of the animated game characters with the actual voices of the girls as a dramatic

performance, and the rules that the girls create to trigger the witches' speeches when a player walks into the invisible trigger volume. Here, a phenomenological account allows an association between the aspects of real and virtual embodiment (for both the fictional characters and the player), and a subjective engagement with the fiction created by the authors of the game and its players.

The second example of how the girls' creatively transform the play is their re-ordering of the spatial logic of the scenes. In Shakespeare's text, the witches are located on the "blasted heath." In the stage direction, this setting is "a desert place," and in some productions (such as Polanski's 1971 film, which the girls have seen) the witches are in a kind of cave. The bedchamber of Duncan, the murdered king, is traditionally located upstairs in Macbeth's castle. This location stems from a general assumption about the position of bedchambers in castles and from some suggestions in the text, for example, Macbeth's response to Lady Macbeth's question "Did you speak?" as he returns from committing the murder: "As I descended?"

However, in their gameworld, the girls construct three levels: a kind of ground floor where the Macbeths plot and prepare the murder, an upstairs, and a downstairs cellar. They place the witches in rooms *upstairs*, and Duncan's bedchamber *downstairs* in the cellar. There is no evidence for their motivation, but this is clearly an inversion of the spatial world of the text and its well-known adaptations in film. A speculative interpretation could draw on Kress and van Leeuwen's "grammar of visual design," which suggests that "top" represents "ideal," and "bottom" represents "real." This meaning makes some sense in the case of the girls' design, in which the witches belong to a fantasy realm and modality, and Duncan's murder belongs to the actual world of history and realpolitik. The design also literally elevates the witches in the girls' interpretation.

The girls' artwork mediates and constructs cultural value in various ways. To begin with, it pulls together the cultural value of Shakespeare (which can be viewed in terms of Williams's *selective tradition*) with the cultural value of videogames as an art-form (which as we have seen in relation to the above discussion, belongs to the world of popular culture). The result can be seen as a kind of cultural mash-up, which productively yokes elements from differently valued traditions together, as in Luhrmann's film *Romeo + Juliet* (1996). Of course, in this case the teacher and the researchers have managed this cultural conjunction by helping to create the task and by providing the tools.

The girls' acts of re-ordering space and time, and their repositioning of the witches, perform rather different functions. They maneuver the aesthetics of the game-text to accommodate their fascination with witchcraft and fantasy. They design their game-world to represent this fantasy by allowing the player an option of visiting the witches in their upstairs rooms. They activate the witches by positioning invisible trigger volumes outside each room, so that when the player walks into them the witches appear and utter their prophecies.

In this case, the category of the *aesthetic* denotes a number of elements, which can be aligned with the three elements that I have proposed above.

First, *aesthetic* refers to the semiotic design of the text: the ways the witches are designed to signify femininity and alienness, and to produce a satisfying frisson that is appropriate for the mandatory uncanny quality of horror narratives. This kind of representation has a long history, and it has been associated with the Kantian *sublime*, as reformulated for contemporary popular culture (Burn, 2010; Donald, 1992). Unlike Kant's conception, however, in which the sublime element is a transcendental feature of the artwork or natural object in question, here the sublime is socially contingent, and designed to produce particular meanings. The production of the witches can be seen as presenting a kind of truth, in the sense of Heidegger's *aletheia*; and in the sense of a social semiotic modality claim. Although the murder of Duncan is more "real" in conventional or naturalistic terms, the witches, despite their fantastic nature, are constructed with a higher modality.

Second, the popular aesthetic of horror invoked here shares some of the features of Aristotle's *aesthesis*, and its connection to sense-perception. This game design is a multimodal text, and the visual shock of the witches is supplemented both by the music that the girls have chosen for this sequence, and by their own performances of the spoken words. The apprehension of these combined modes is further augmented by the player's virtual embodiment. This is a first-person game, so the player has no visible body, but of course there is a player entity, positioned at an appropriate height and attached to the "eyes" of a virtual camera. The sense of moving into this space, then, is a movement partly controlled by the player's decisions (fast or slow? hesitant or decisive?) and partly by the girls' design of the trigger volumes. These features amplify the sensory quality of the aesthetic.

The poetics of the media, then, do not simply refer to how beautifully shaped the text is (although it may mean that too). Rather, it signifes the alliance of visual, auditory and procedural design with the complex cultural values in play, combined with the meanings given by the designers in terms of identities, pleasures and cultural repertoires.

Third, the construction of the witches is mediated by taste: by the young designers' experiences of the pleasures of fantasy and horror, which they in turn offer to the players of their game.

Conclusion: Poetics, culture and media literacy

The discussion of cultural value in this chapter, and of how value is negotiated by teachers and students through the development of particular aesthetic strategies, suggests the need for media educators to interweave the cultural dispositions of their students with an expanding exploration of new cultural territory, in the context of playful, imaginative, creative production work.

In reflecting on Raymond Williams's three levels of culture, I propose that media educators move beyond a preoccupation with the contemporary moment of lived culture, although they must always return to this moment as the space where meaning is made in the students' social realm—where values are chosen, identities forged, pleasures enjoyed, representations understood. At the same time, however, the contemporary moment is enriched by an interrogation of the past: of the cultures of parents and grandparents, of media texts revalued

through retro-culture, of the archaeology of media, of the history of cinema, the origins of the camera or the birth and adolescence of video-games.

Hall and Whannel's *The Popular Arts* poses some difficult questions about cultural value, along with some productive but controversial solutions. The arguments and analyses offered in this chapter endorse the instinct that in some sense, cultural value resides in the structures, meanings and affective charges of textual design. Value is established in the fabric of the text itself, in the artisanal technologies that fuse ideas with material substance and transform the stuff of culture using Vygotsky's semiotic tools. However, this argument also supports Hall and Whannel's instinct that value is created socially by users and producers of media. These transformations in the dialogue between the text and its immediate or historical contexts explain how cultural value can be both intrinsic and extrinsic.

My argument also endorses Hall and Whannel's sense that popular culture is best understood and analyzed in relation to elite culture, although not, as they suggest, in a relation of inferiority. This argument chimes with Williams's insistence on the interdependence of his cultural levels. In simple terms, we might say that the cultures of past and present, or popular and elite, are best brought into connection in the classroom. These cultures must be connected if our students are to understand how distinctions are made—in their own time and in the past, or in their own social groups and those of others.

Accordingly, this chapter emphasizes the poetics of the media, and does so in the context of a media arts approach to media education and media literacy. If examined alone, poetics simply disappears into empty style, or is recruited for more sinister purposes, as Walter Benjamin famously observed (Benjamin 1938/1968). Of course any poetics of the media needs to serve as an obverse face of the rhetorical coin: politics and poetics together provide the space in which students can learn, not only to enjoy and create beautifully crafted artworks, but also to understand how they can represent the social realities of their world. This conjunction of rhetoric and poetics—of critical suspicion and critical appreciation—seems to me the ideal balance which a media arts approach is well-qualified to manage. An attention to the three aspects of media aesthetics that I propose, *design, materiality* and *taste*, will support connections across time to the cultural heritage of the media arts, across the contemporary landscape of cultural values and across the social interests that construct and maintain these values. We can have the popular arts, but we need not be constrained by them.

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