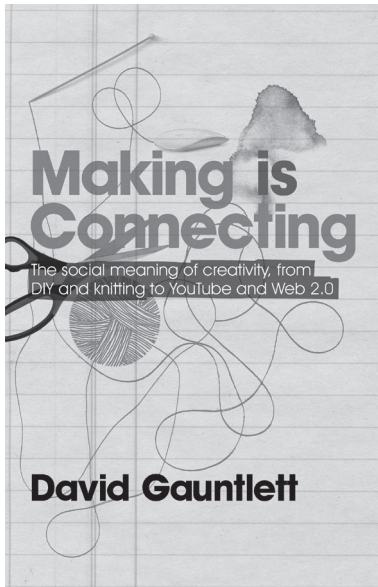## Extended Review: *Making is Connecting: The social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to You Tube and Web 2.0* by David Gauntlett (2011, London: Polity)

Editor's Introduction: *MERJ* readers will be familiar with the work of David Gauntlett who, in recent years, has written books and shared a plethora of online material around the themes of media and identity, the environment, creativity, visual and metaphorical research methods, Media Studies 2.0 and now - and most ambitiously - a general theory of *Making is Connecting*. In this new work he offers a dialogic 'tapestry', relating creative media activity (in the realm of web 2.0) to knitting and 'guerilla gardening' among many other examples of ordinary people actively producing media, art and craft in ways which are social and collaborative.

This is probably the most interesting period in the genealogy of media education precisely because we are spending far less time thinking about 'the media' and more of our attention is directed towards ourselves – and each other - and how media fit into ordinary life alongside a range of other ways of being literate, social and creative with others. And so there is no question that *Making is Connecting*, along with the debates around participation we explore with Henry Jenkins and others in our keynote editorial should be on the radar of media teachers. But we were keen to look at the book from a different angle – that of 'creativity' as an academic field – often neglected, or at best 'cherry-picked' by media education, if we are honest. We were, then, delighted that the author agreed to a different kind of review – in keeping with our interest in exchange, and making use of the connecting affordances of technology, we invited Mark Readman and Dave Trotman, two educators with a history of academic research into creativity to read

the book and offer some critical responses about the academic foundations of the book for David to discuss, alongside our own questions for the author from our media pedagogy perspective.

So firstly we asked David to account for his 'journey' from a critique of the effects model and 'theory trading cards' to his work on gender and identity, through visual and creative research methods, via the hotly contested 'Media Studies 2.0' (to which we devote our next issue to looking back at) to this more far-reaching and bold theory of connecting through making – with attendant environmental, ethical and political aspirations. Put simply, how does a media teacher end up here?

David Gauntlett: Well, I always wanted to do work that was in some way socially relevant and useful, combined with my interest in media and what people did with media, and wanting to find new or innovative ways to explore that. And in addition I wanted to engage people differently and to communicate in forms other than the famously unread academic journals. So the things you mention are all different dimensions of that really.

In *Making is Connecting*, I intend to demonstrate that everyday creativity – people making things, online or in the physical world – is not just a 'nice' way for individuals to pass the time, but is absolutely crucial for individual life satisfaction, and for the overall health of a society. It's a Media Studies book, in that it concerns the value of You Tube and other web 2.0 platforms, and offers a critique of more traditional media; but it seeks to understand these new platforms for creativity and exchange of ideas in the context of a broader spread of creative and craft activities, as you have mentioned, and in the context of what people have said about the meaning of everyday creativity, not just in relation to digital media but about different things and at different times.

For instance, it redeploys comments by Victorian art critic John Ruskin on medieval cathedral gargoyles as a way of looking at You Tube videos. It finds that the nineteenth-century socialist and tapestry-weaver William Morris dispensed a blueprint for the making and sharing ethos of web 2.0 in general, and Wikipedia in particular, 120 years early. The book takes the 1970s feminist Rozsika Parker's view of women's embroidery as a 'weapon of resistance', and considers it in relation to blogging; and it draws upon a lot of hard social-science data, gathered by economists as well as psychologists, regarding human happiness and social capital. Put simply, this shows that the most important things for a satisfying life in society are the opportunity to have creative control over whole projects, to make your mark and be recognised within a social network, and warm human relationships generally.

So, the book draws on diverse sources, but it's not as whimsical or random as it may

sound when I run off these examples here. I deliberately wanted to spread the net wide, to bring in the most fruitful ways of understanding the most recent forms of everyday creativity in the light of other forms and long-standing critical perspectives.

Julian McDougall: *MERJ* readers are a broad church of media educators, from primary teachers to researchers in higher education – all in one way or another concerned with teaching with or about media. How do you see the book being of interest or use to media educators, in particular?

DG: Well, it's not really for me to say if it'll be useful or not, but I would hope that the book is helpful because it gives an overview of a major trend, which if we are careful and fortunate will be the way in which people's use of media changes – the shift from being just a consumer to being a more active participant and creator; and it also gives readers quite a bit of handy detail about how that works at the moment, and what people are saying about it. Then it also provides some useful tools and perspectives for thinking about these changes and why we really need them. And in particular, hopefully it will give educators things to discuss with their students, and things for the students to discuss between themselves. You don't even need to agree with it!

I thought it was important to make the case for a positive and optimistic way in which things *could* develop, if only we as social actors would push for that. In critical media theory you typically just get scholars explaining the negative side of everything – which, in this area, tends to be the concerns about surveillance and privacy online, and the unpredictability of commercial platforms – and how it will probably get worse. Those are valuable warnings, but I think you also need constructive suggestions. I'm saying, 'OK, I can see how the Web can be exploited in a *bad* way, but let's consider what would be a *good* way to use it' — and giving an answer.

Dave Trotman: Looking at the book from the perspective of creativity research and literature, I think *Making is Connecting* offers a very human response to the 'contemporary condition', and one which, for the most part, I am actually sympathetic to. Indeed, chapter seven, 'Tools for Change' (which connects Ivan Illich with the web 2.0 environment) encapsulated some of the shared sentiment – and I enjoyed reading this chapter perhaps more than any other. The patchwork of eclectic references also provide an interesting 'weave' of material that for me, attempts to connect (and I guess this might be the subtext) some intriguing perspectives – which will be of interest to the intended audience.

Regarding the focus on creativity, this is principally framed by one study – that of

Csikszentmihalyi, which sits in a long tradition of North American research – mostly from the field of cognitive and social psychology – and this is absent from the discussion. Claxton's work (which I think offers a better account of creativity than Csikszentmihalyi's) is also situated within this tradition. But there are other important counterpoints/responses to this from the field of Critical Theory and Sociology (e.g. Willis's *Common Culture* and the grounded aesthetic, and Woods and Jeffrey's ethnographic studies of creativity in schools), so I think this presents a particular definition and description of creativity to the uninitiated reader. There can be 'cultural blindspots' in creativity research that Anna Craft has reported. This has a particular bearing on how different ethnic, faith and cultural groups may perceive creative practice, e.g. as a matter of community endeavour over individual enterprise; or a spiritual experience over material encounter. This aspect seems to me to be entirely relevant to the overall project of the book as well as offering a necessary multi-perspectival view of creativity. Also, the significance of imagination in the project is another phenomenon that has been the subject of intensive research (see Eisner, Egan et al) – and as a critical precursor to creative work. Following Csikszentmihalyi, there is an assumption that creativity is, or has to be, a matter of public expression, and that community is a necessary part of this. Whilst I don't necessary disagree that this is a good thing, much of the creative domain can be intensely personal, private and solitary (see Storr's thinking on this for example) – creating is disconnecting? Finally, the problem of creativity as a 'good thing' - weapons of torture, terrorism, human trafficking etc all require levels of ingenuity, innovation and problem solving in creative form.

Mark Readman: I also found myself slightly conflicted when reading David's book; I found the rhetoric regarding activities which can improve one's life to be seductive, but I agree that the use of Csikszentmihalyi's as the 'dominant' model of creativity is rather skewed, especially given Paul Willis' democratic celebration of 'common culture' and the inevitably creative nature of young people's lives.

DG: Okay, well, these comments concern only a few pages of the book, in which I discuss Csikszentmihalyi's definition of creativity, and then set out an alternative – and in doing so, implicitly accept several of the points here. The observations imply that I am taking Csikszentmihalyi's model as a superior one, but that is very clearly not the case. On the contrary, I highlight weaknesses with that model and suggest a very different alternative.

I did not set out to present a comprehensive literature review of 'creativity' definitions or approaches. Several publications exist which do that already, and I refer to some of them in the book, but that wasn't the point here. I single out Csikszentmihalyi's definition

because it appears so often in discussions of 'creativity'. I've got lots of books with 'creativity' in the title on my shelves, and most of them wheel out Csikszentmihalyi at the start, and tend to follow in his footsteps. I even make reference to a meta-analysis of 'creativity' definitions in the literature, which basically found that they almost all congregated around the Csikszentmihalyi approach. We might all like Paul Willis, but he doesn't get a look in there.

That is indeed due to the dominance of a particular, mostly North American kind of approach, and one which has cultural blindspots – that's why I wanted to suggest an alternative! The Storr point is a good one, but this is a book about the social dimensions of creativity, so that wasn't a primary concern here. The point of the book was not to show off about all the stuff I've read, or to overwhelm the reader with multiple layers of literature review.

Finally, there is the point that creativity is not always 'good', and can have nasty applications. First of all, this is acknowledged in the book anyway. But more importantly, in general terms, do we want a population which is more creative and interested in flexing their creative muscles as part of everyday activity, or do you want them to be passive and unimaginative? Of course, we want the former. Well, I do. And so you have to take creativity as a general good, and encourage it, even if people could be creative in horrible ways, just as they can do almost anything in horrible ways. Otherwise it's like saying that literacy is not necessarily a good thing because some people might read terrorist handbooks.

MR: It's perhaps ironic, given David's earlier work, that the definition of creativity he proposes in this book is so non-sociological, but one which depends upon an essentialist notion of human nature and something which reaches for transcendence.

DG: Ah — I'm afraid that in academic circles, calling someone 'essentialist' is a way to shoot someone down without really having to explain yourself, isn't it? David Buckingham did it too in his recent criticisms of my research methods work. I was surprised by that attack, not least because it didn't make any sense, and seemed to involve deliberately misunderstanding what I'd said.

But let's look at this 'essentialist' claim. An essentialist view would be that 'human nature', whatever that is, is fixed and not the result of cultural conditions. Obviously I don't think that. (My *Media, Gender and Identity* devotes most of its pages to arguing the exact opposite). In the new book I do say that generally people benefit from human relationships and connections, from having a project to work on, from being engaged in a creative

activity. But that was the starting point which then I had to flesh out with lots of evidence. There's a whole chapter on the empirical research by economists and social scientists into human happiness, and another chapter on the 'social capital' research, all based on lots of hard data. So I do say that here are some supportable generalisations we can make about what tends to be good for people, and for society. If we can't do that without people making the dismissive comment about essentialism – which implies you haven't read enough cultural studies books, and must be secretly right wing – then we're all in trouble.

MR: I'm also always resistant to definitions of 'creativity': I can't accept it as a 'thing', but rather a concept that is always mobilised more or less convincingly according to particular sets of interests. So I would be critical of any definition, because definitions tend to name and fix things in order to make them instrumental or operational. And I think the aim in this book could be viewed as an instrumental one; 'creativity' is liberated from the clutches of psychologists in order to allow quotidian practitioners to possess it and maybe, therefore, it is put to work here as a 'functional myth'. What I mean by this is that people may construct their 'creative' efforts as worthwhile if they can attribute 'creativity' to themselves and may be motivated to do more of this.

DG: Well, that's not how I would have put it, but seems okay.

DT: I guess I am less concerned about a definition of creativity but rather a fuller and more informed account of the complexity of the field (disciplinary colonisation, sites of contest etc). The book has something very useful to offer at a genuinely practical level; for the You Tube producers, for the collective of sound engineers and composers, and the guerrilla dance groups etc who may think that the products of their labour are something other than creative in terms of public/conventional/ Csikszentmihalyi's criteria. So maybe some more examples of grass roots practice/commentaries by the 'creatives' might have helped consolidate its position as a guide to self-help and community collaboration…?

MR: That's a good point – it might have done.

DG: Well, in the first chapter (which is free online at www.makingisconnecting.org – so readers of this discussion can judge for themselves), I make it clear that the book does not intend to be a series of case studies – which exist elsewhere, and which I point to – but is more of an attempt to pull together a set of different ideas, arguments, and research findings in order to make a new argument.

The subtext when I wrote that explanation was that it deliberately wasn't meant to be a Malcolm Gladwell-style wander through some fascinating cases and anecdotes. Gladwell is a brilliantly clear and clever writer, but I had no illusions of competing with him.

JMcD: In the book, you describe a shift from a passive to a more active culture (from 'sit back and be told' to 'making and doing') and talk about Illich and 'deschooling' in this context. McLuhan is also, by others, reinvoked as having prophesised web 2.0 (although you discuss him more in terms of television being part of 'sit back' – there's a link to Postman here which, again, I would argue with as I think television reception is more active than this suggests) and you use a communal allotment metaphor to describe how web 2.0 facilitates the kind of participation and exchange that Berners Lee thought the internet would foster. Can you say a bit about your writing on 'convivial tools' – I think you have managed to avoid the technological determinism some of us are routinely accused of – so can you expand on how you did so?

DG: 'Technological determinism' is a charge which is often levelled at people who are merely seeking to discuss ways in which technology *could* be used. It's laughable, sometimes – and quite intolerable – how an argument which merely dares to suggest a positive rather than negative application of social media is instantly branded as 'technological determinism'. You could say it's part of an academic sickness, that to be seen as 'cool' and 'critical' you can only subscribe to the most negative diagnoses of everything. As I said before, we do need the warnings about the ways that capitalist businesses will try to exploit web 2.0 platforms and their users – I genuinely care about that too – but to only offer damning criticisms, and nothing positive, seems to be surprisingly unhelpful, since these technologies are already here.

The idea of 'convivial tools' comes from Ivan Illich. It describes those tools which a person can use to make their own meanings, to express themselves, and to shape their environment so that it embodies their own orientations, meanings and preferences. At the opposite end of the scale are 'industrial tools', which only allow you to fit within their predetermined mould. You can use this notion to evaluate technologies by asking, 'Does it help you to do *your* thing, or does it want you to do *its* thing?'. In media terms, a platform like You Tube is more of a convivial tool, I would say, whilst television is more of an industrial tool. That doesn't mean that You Tube is the answer to all of society's problems, or that TV is evil, but it's a fruitful way of thinking about them as types of tools. It's especially helpful in more subtle cases. For example we did a study of the BBC's virtual world for children, *Adventure Rock*, which the BBC promoted as being wonderfully

'interactive' and 'creative'. But if you ask, 'Does it help you to do *your* thing, or does it want you to do *its* thing?', well *Adventure Rock* only really wanted you to do *its* thing. Then that gives you a starting point for a more detailed critique.

JMcD: When people talk about 'digital media', with regard to creativity, literacy, participation or identity, things get lumped together and generalised, but in your book you carefully distinguish – for example, between the 'ambient intimacy' of Twitter or Flickr, and the way that Second Life restricts immediacy through the imposition of the avatar – but is there a case for seeing identity-play in virtual worlds as a way of being creative and collaborative and maybe that designing an avatar to 'stand in' for yourself might be liberating precisely because it isn't so immediate?

DG: Well perhaps. I have to admit I have a bit of a blind spot here. Maybe there will be virtual worlds in the future which will be valuable tools. But, as it records in the book, I felt rather anxious in the mid-2000s when people were saying that Second Life was the way that all online life was going to go. Because it's a rather clunky way of communicating and connecting, in my personal experience. The avatar gets in the way; the whole setup is not that expressive; it looks a bit naff. I secretly wished it wouldn't catch on because I didn't like the feel of it. And indeed, now we can see that basically it hasn't become the new home of everything online, and my students dislike it more than I do. I guess I like online tools where people can make their mark and communicate their meanings on their own terms, not by having to process it through someone else's idea of the world.

JMcD: Coming at this in relation to the debates over 'Media Studies 2.0', which we'll explore in the next, themed issue of *MERJ*, I was very interested in the section on critics of web 2.0, and the discussion around ownership and control, and particularly how the big corporations have managed not to 'ruin' the platforms they offer – to what extent is this about the politics of ownership and access, as opposed to functionality and design – or is it both?

DG: It's to do with both, isn't it, in that you need a well-designed platform, and then you need to run it carefully. But the point is that You Tube, say, is currently a usable and engaging platform that, *to date*, has not been totally ruined with excessive adverts or other unwelcome corporate interventions. But I also talk about how it doesn't make any money, and the emphasis is on how such platforms have not been spoiled *so far*.

I don't like the way that the web 2.0 model typically requires us to hand over our creative products to commercial companies in order to get them easily and widely shared. Indeed, I have suggested that you might expect that one of our national public institutions – or an international consortium of them – might reasonably be expected to develop a non-commercial alternative. There's no reason why this would not be a serious suggestion. If you want to foster creativity in society – and with all the challenges that we face, who wouldn't want to do that – then it would be a very sensible and *relatively* inexpensive thing to do. To put it in perspective: the cost of running You Tube is less than eight per cent of the cost of running the BBC.

However, nobody takes this seriously. For example I was at a British Library event, and the British Library has a project to archive all of the UK's webpages. This is an eye-wateringly massive project, which would be incredibly expensive to do properly, and one which arguably rather misses the point of the Web. What if, I suggested, they put all that money into supporting a platform for *new* creativity, rather than archiving already-existing things? The assembled academics and librarians only laughed politely. But a properly supported, non-commercial web 2.0 platform would be a wonderful thing to help foster the creative capacity of the population in a sustainable way, and would be exempt from all the criticisms that the supposedly 'political' critics make of Web 2.0 platforms today. It's not going to happen any time soon, though.

MR: If we can discuss the book's style, I was aware of a strong flavour of anti-intellectualism or, at least, anti-academicism in the book and I wonder if this is part of a strategy to resist the kind of reading that Dave and I have been imposing on it. Who is the audience for this book?

DT: I was also left wondering as to just exactly who the text is aimed at. At one level its 'register' reminded me very much of a Gladwell's 'Tipping Point' and Goleman's 'Emotional Intelligence' – the former, an unabashed piece of journalism and the latter considered to be the same by some of Goleman's harsher critics. So I wasn't clear whether this was indeed an anti-intellectual thesis, or selective synthesis for the layperson.

DG: Well, the book is for anyone who wants to read it. I strongly disagree with the idea that the book is anti-intellectual – it's full of enthusiastic discussion of intellectual people and ideas. I can say that without even needing to make any claims about my own cognitive abilities. You could say, perhaps, that it is anti-*pretentious*, in that I sometimes make fun of needlessly pompous people and arguments, but I don't think that's a major theme. And as

for the suggestion that there is necessarily an inverse relationship between readability and quality – well, I didn't think that intelligent people believe that that's true any more. As for Gladwell, see my earlier comment.

MR: I also noticed that the book has a tendency to elide potentially contradictory elements; 'craft' and 'creativity' for example which, in other contexts, are set against each other. I think *Making is Connecting* yokes together a whole range of things and argues that, essentially, they all have something in common – it's promiscuous in its embrace of products and ideas in the service of the thesis that 'making is connecting'. Having said that, I'm not immune to the rhetoric – promiscuity can be seductive sometimes! One would have to be a curmudgeon to argue against the proposition that we need to explore things to make our experience of life more pleasurable, to attempt to connect with other people in more meaningful ways and to attempt to fulfil our potential. Emotionally, then, I'm on board.

In addition, the book seems to fit into a wider project to increase public understanding of ideas (David's You Tube videos constitute an aspect of this work). The populism I referred to earlier makes me think that perhaps I've subjected the book to a reading which is not invited; it actually works very well for a non-specialist, non-academic audience and makes inventive and engaging connections between a range of thinkers and practices. Furthermore, it's an artfully constructed piece of work with a persuasive tone – the use of Illich is particularly cogent, and it's a neat device to delay the references to Illich's notion of 'joy' in order to set up an echo of the 'new definition' of creativity earlier in the book. I enjoyed reading it and, at times, was even inspired to join in, and believe that I could be enriched by practising some kind of 'creative' activity!

DT: Despite some of the issues we have drawn out, I'm clear about the positive contribution the book has to make. I would also find it difficult to argue against the valuable triangulation of making, creativity and well-being that is achieved in *Making is Connecting*.

JMcD: My own view of *Making is Connecting* is that it's a timely and very well constructed, readable and optimistic contribution to a hitherto confused and clumsily articulated area – the value of creativity for media education. But I can see how being bold enough to offer that will inevitably be controversial, as is illustrated by our two reviewers. And I don't agree with all of it myself – see my earlier comments about television and Second Life - which I think is too briefly discussed and dismissed – and also I'd like to have seen a discussion of the relationship between creative participation, cultural capital and social class – an

important theme in the editorial exchange in this issue.

Crucially, though, the book is not just an abstracted theory but is informed by research, so we should resist any binary opposition between engaging books like this and academic research, because *Making is Connecting* offers both. The general theory the book offers is presented with optimism and passion. But at the same time I still believe in the value of peer reviewed academic research into pedagogy, and I would be anxious about dispensing with it. We need lively, engaging books like *Making is Connecting* and also peer review – or do we?

DG: Well, a book gets reviewed by lots of people, both before and especially after publication. It gets reviewed many more times than an academic paper does. I don't suppose we want to get into a big debate about 'peer reviewed' academic journal articles here, but it seems a relatively ineffective and somewhat phony or random way of guaranteeing quality. I mean, it's a form of filter, for sure, but not necessarily the best one, and does it guarantee quality? We all know it doesn't.

I never understand why the publishing of academic papers could not entirely be put over to a 'publish, then filter' model, where everything is published online and is then *subsequently* rated for quality. Journal publishers argue that they are essential and irreplaceable gatekeepers of quality. But that's not true. Academic authors would not want to humiliate themselves, so would only publish items online when they thought that they were satisfactory. After that moment, formalised online rating systems as well as the everyday more informal transactions that have become familiar – people sharing links to articles that they like, with their peers – would take over to sort the good stuff from the bad, as well as making it all freely accessible.

I'm not arguing, of course, for the closure of your lovely *MERJ*! But if, in due course, MERJ became a respected online portal that hosted links to the best stuff on media education, from anywhere in the world, freely available, and annotated with reviews from people who had liked, or disliked, or had questions about the material … that wouldn't be a *bad* outcome, I don't think.

In conclusion (Julian McDougall):
This issue of *MERJ* has featured a great deal of discussion about some big ideas for media education, in our opening editorial exchange and this one. In both cases, there are arguments about the detail and some critique of academic foundations but broad agreement on the failure of contemporary formal education to respond to what's going on outside of the institution, 'Beyond Technology, as Buckingham puts it. It's not often we

talk about 'happiness' in education – James Paul Gee writes about 'passion communities' and there are connections between the future vision of education in this book, Gee's observations and some of Michael Wesch's methods for transgressing student experience – but we talk a lot about *engagement* and *Making is Connecting* is explicitly looking at this.

These ideas also profilerate in the emerging *Media Education Manifesto*, to which David Gauntlett, Mark Readman and all of our editorial participants have contributed (at http://www.manifestoformediaeducation.co.uk). Wherever you stand on definitions and influences and the question of where you start out from, *Making is Connecting* is essential reading for media educators. Gauntlett takes us beyond instrumental notions of assessing creative practice or teaching with new media into a more far-reaching and political view of how human beings are finding new ways of making their mark on the world, contributing to culture and 'doing it for ourselves'. In a period where 'experts' are bombarding us with moral panics about 'screen addiction' and 'toxic childhood', usually without any research evidence or attention to the fields of existing literature, *Making is Connecting* redresses the balance and gives voice to the creative communities, on and offline, too often spoken *about* from positions of ignorance and suspicion.

Reviewers – Mark Readman and Dave Trotman
Respondent / author – David Gauntlett
Chair / editor – Julian McDougall