Book Reviews

Digital Media and Learner Identity: The New Curatorship by John Potter (2012, New York: Palgrave MacMillan)

As we are publishing this review in the same issue as an article in which John Potter summarises much of the thinking and research evidence that informs *Digital Media and Learner Identity*, we can dispense with the customary summary of the content and move instead to an appraisal.

This book is the outcome of a sustained period of research activity and, as such, weaves an over-arching theory from the outcomes of time spent with young people in and around their modes of digital learning (as opposed to doing it the other way around, which has too often been the case where paradigm-shift theories of all things 'new' and digital have been concerned). As such, it's a significant contribution to both academic thinking and 'practical' 'doing' about and of learning in the 21st century.

A framework for moving this project forward arises out of a series of informed positions: that curatorship is a useful metaphor (not a model) for understanding young people's in and out of school learning as a 'semi-permeable membrane'; that performance is a key element of media learning; and that new digital media provide new contexts for 'making the self' – education's response to which should be to foster reflexive learning – the 'how' as well as the what; or, to echo Mark Prensky, the verbs as well as the nouns (although there is much to divide Potter's work from the 'digital native' school of thought, I think he'd agree with that pedagogic relation, at least). Potter's book carefully and forensically develops the theory out of a rounded history of new literacy studies and its conceptual 'mapping' in critical theory, most notably Foucault and Bourdieu, and then finishes by connecting his own 'manifesto' for digital media learning to Institute of Education colleague Neil Selwyn's sobering 'commandments' for future research in the field.

The structure is circular. We begin with an outline of his way of thinking, comparing Grayson Perry's bricolage of artefacts from his own 'lifeworld' within the British Museum's vast collection of objects to the author's aunt's offline life. Next we trace the genealogy of new literacy studies and the elements of critical theory that have shaped the more 'socio-cultural' attitudes to literacy development that we'd assume readers will share, before a detailed account is offered of Potter's research with children learning in and with moving images. One less satisfying area is the frequent discussion of online participation and more virtual media practices which are not supported in the same way by the author's own research. Because video is at the heart of the research evidence, sometimes there might

be a level of assumption about how typical these children's experiences have been of all 'digital media curation' – I'm thinking about social media exchange and game design in particular.

The argument made and sustained here is that we should see 'Curatorship' as a fourth C, along with Creative, Cultural and Critique – the conceptual frame provided by OCFOM and various media literacy task forces and directives during the New Labour 'golden days' of legitimation for our work, we might go as far as to reflect. What this means for learning is to do with '*knowing how the reflexive project of the self with its anchored and transient identities gets made and unmade over time*'. Identity and memory are given due prominence in the examples of research explorations and, whilst the latter has been a focus for media and cultural fields in recent years, memory has been more peripheral in 'mainstream' discussions about digital media and learning.

Along the way the book provides examples of media learning that we're encouraged to understand in terms of the key principles of mimesis, transgression and reflexion – but, crucially, at no point are we to understand these as somehow innate to young people in digital spaces – these are the approaches to teach. 'Micro' examples include the importance of facilitating incremental understanding of the grammar of moving images as a layer above the lexis, which is more likely to be brought along – through the membrane – as prior learning and strategies for developing empathy with young peoples' media experiences. The Institute, through the previous work of David Buckingham and Chris Richards, have a track record in sharing research into the home/school boundary but this contribution goes further in shaping a model that teachers can start to apply, moving from small-scale, novelty projects to an embedded practice across the curriculum. Of course, current and future policy is likely to be the biggest obstacle.

The greatest achievement of 'The New Curatorship' is the artful sidestepping of the polarising extremes of both technological determinism and its more reductive opposition in order to provide us with a fully research-based account, free from both polemic and denial. For academics, researchers and – most crucially – teachers seeking an intelligent and inclusive framework for bridging the widening gap between education and 'lifeworld' learning and between scales of access and new forms of digital 'capital', this is exactly what we've been waiting for. Curatorship of identity and self, through digital and social media, is cultural, not merely technical, and Potter goes beyond just observing this from the 'ivory tower' to map out a convincing strategy for our response.

Reviewer – Julian McDougall

Advances in Visual Methodology, edited by Sarah Pink (2012, London: Sage) / *A Beginner's Guide to Doing Your Education Research Project* by Mike Lambert (2012, London: Sage)

These two books, both from Sage, are rich resources for practitioner researchers in media education at different ends of the spectrum. Sarah Pink's edited collection brings together a range of experienced researchers to share and exemplify their work with visual data in social research. Mike Lambert's textbook caters for first time educational researchers, with a core intended audience of postgraduates and teacher-researchers and an emphasis on action research. As MERJ aims to support early career practitioner researchers, including the growing cohort of teachers engaging with masters programmes in creative and media education and the adoption of visual research techniques is increasing in media and cultural studies research, both of these new books will be of value to MERJ readers and prospective contributors.

Sarah Pink is now a leading name in visual ethnography and in this collection the net is cast wider to include chapters on visual ethics (Andrew Clark); auto-ethno cartography (Christina Grasseni); body arts (Christina Lammer); digital technologies (Roderick Coover et al); Pink's own latest writing on internet ethnography and film archive anthropology (Marcus Banks).

The strength of the collection lies in the consistent combining of introductory material with evidence from authors' own research and reflexive critique of political and ethical issues arising from the work. Some of the chapters do assume some prior understanding of the existing fields that the authors' interventions challenge or negotiate for new possibilities – for example,. Lammer writes 'this chapter has addressed the interrelations of epistemic cultures that are usually carefully set apart' (186) and whilst the pages that come before carefully explain how this position is worked through in a specific research project – so the argument is illustrated and exemplified – the reader does need a working knowledge of research methodologies from the arts and social science. Likewise, Elisendra Ardevol's chapter on Virtual / Visual Ethnography, which explores the use of the internet in ethnographic fieldwork, starts out to an extent from the outcomes of the extensive review of the field in Pink's *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2006).

Media pedagogy researchers do need to combine a 'macro' level understanding of methodologies with an awareness of existing research in related fields, and a 'front to back' reading of *Advances in Visual Methodologies* will certainly provide this, so recommended reading for doctoral students and teacher-researchers who either intend to elicit visual

date or just want to know why they won't. For more experienced readers, the book's most explicit 'turn' is in Pink's editorial statement that the collection 'examines the multiple routes that are developing and the way that they constitute visual methodology as a field of scholarship' (7) – so we are encouraged to see the strands of methodology here as a field of scholarship as opposed to (or as well as, rather) a 'toolkit' for use across fields.

Mike Lambert's *Beginner's Guide* is an excellent, user-friendly and overwhelmingly supportive book for anyone who has had the experience of living in the lonely space between interesting intentions (often passionate and personal) for research into their own education practice and the alientating discourse of research paradigms. I am thinking of students setting out on taught doctorates or the research element of a masters programme or other CPD route – people with very busy lives, generally.

Beginning with a 'translation' of paradigms and research ethics and moving through the importance of mapping the field of existing research, approaches to the literature review, methods, research design and analysis, the intention is very clear – to 'mirror' the chapter structure and accompanying physical process of a masters dissertation or doctoral thesis, as opposed to a smaller scale funded project, piece of practitioner enquiry or another intervention that is not 'written up' in conventional terms. With Pink's book in mind, there is one omission – the focus on the traditional structure described here leaves little space for visual methods, online data generation (other than a cursory reference to social media as something 'educationalists increasingly use' and a problematic warning about 'trusting' Wikipedia, which we might be sceptical about in a text which earlier encourages readers to be critical about epistemology) or research by practice. But in fairness, these are marginal concerns in relation to the 'core objectives' of the book, which are to offer a step-by-step textbook structure with an emphasis on careful and clear explanation. For example, we talk a lot to research students, but when assessing the viability of proposals about 'new knowledge' how can we expect an inexperienced teacher-researcher to unpick the layers of assumption in such an idea? Lambert starts the explanation thus:

> Here is a rather tricky concept: the 'originality' of your research. The value of your project is increased if it contributes to new knowledge and understanding, but with the wealth of research already carried out, you may feel: 'How can I find anything interesting or original to say. Do not despair ….' (61)

As I read the words, I can hear myself saying them to MA dissertation students, or expressing similar assurances at one of our MERJ seminars, and so the best testament to the value of the book I can provide is that it speaks a language that is much needed for the

audience, when so many research methods 'guidebooks' do the opposite by adding layers of mystification. However, it is important to say that the best adoption of this *Beginner's Guide* would be strategic alliance with something like Scott and Usher's *Researching Education* (2010), using the one to scaffold the 'translation' of the other.

To this end, activities, case studies, key points and accompanying web resources – including a Facebook community to allow reader/researchers to network and share ideas – scaffold the reader's journey through what can be a profoundly uncomfortable and scary world of research jargon and academic posturing, so my quibbles here will be far outweighed by the benefits to the intended audience. Certainly it is a resource I'll be recommending to research students as a kind of 'comfort blanket' in the taught phase of the Taught Educational Doctorate programme or the dissertation stage at MA. With the sometimes narrow focus on data in words and numbers and written outcomes aside, this is a textbook which does what it says on the cover, and very well.

Reviewer – Julian McDougall

Greening the Media by Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller (2012, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press)

> In the factory, I assemble five computer cards per minute. More than 3,000 cards in my 11-hour daily shift. But I have never used a computer myself, I don't know how to... – *unnamed Mexican worker*

Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller's impressive book on the truth behind the production, consumption and disposal of media technologies and its human cost as well as environmental pollution makes for powerful and sobering reading.

For those of us who believed we were '*doing our bit*' for the environment in terms of how we recycle our own waste and observe strict rules in avoiding 'sweat shop' clothing brands, this book asks us to look much deeper at our compliance as consumers of media technologies. The book traces the history of media production from the manufacture of paper, telegraphy and screens, making the point that, with new 'emerging' technologies, we have become used to buying into their inventive genius and rarely do we consider the environmental and human cost.

Maxwell and Miller place the stated 'green polices' of major corporations against the most harrowing stories of workers in places like China, Mexico, India and Brazil, whose job

it is to make our smartphones and iPads.

There are extensive and shocking statistics related to media technology production and consumption, as well as some amusingly ironic ones. For a 'green' issue, *Vanity Fair* flew Annie Leibowitz to Germany to photograph a polar bear – causing the emission of 51 tons of carbon.

The book advocates 'the wisdom of doubt in place of the frenzy of innovation'. At just 165 pages, it is thoroughly researched and clearly structured. It's a surprisingly easy and engaging read. I would recommend it to all media educators.

Reviewer – Donal Beecher

Mythologies by Roland Barthes (1972, 1979)

Laughey's Canon

Editor's note: This review is third of our series in which a current media education practitioner re-examines a 'classic' text in honour of *MERJ* editorial board member Dan Laughey and his provocative 'Back to Basics' article in *MERJ* 2:2.

It's doubtful whether Barthes would have seen election to a Media Studies canon as an achievement. He was dubious enough about the process by which his writing might become his *oeuvre*, which he described as a 'move from a contingency of writings to the transcendence of a unitary, sacred product'. 'I delight ceaselessly, endlessly,' he said, 'in writing as in a perpetual production, in an unconditional dispersion, in an energy of seduction which no legal defence of the subject I fling upon the page can any longer halt.' One of his notions of a 'new linguistic science' is that it would address the 'solidification of old metaphors', that it would track 'the progress of their solidification, their densification throughout historical discourse'. The canon, of course, is just such an 'old metaphor'.

It is also a myth *par excellence*, though frustratingly not one that Barthes realised the potential of. Its existence as a cultural practice, a 'signifying consciousness' rather than an object or even, merely, an idea marks it out as a suitable case for treatment. Barthes presents myth as a second order semiological system that depends firstly on signification taking place, in a sign being produced. This sign then becomes the signifier for a second

order transaction wherein meaning becomes form; in Barthes' words, 'the meaning leaves its contingency behind: it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains'. Barthes' now famous example concerns a young Black soldier saluting the *tricolour*, but it might just as well be the 'election' of *Mythologies* to the canon. For Barthes the myth, as form, is 'slightly impoverished': the myth is not a purified essence but rather a 'formless,unstable, nebulous condensation whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function'. And its function is to be appropriated.

Whatever its origin, the myth works through deformation, thus the "Negro salute" loses its history, is 'changed into gesture'. So too the canon, 'vitrified into an eternal reference', meant to both represent and embody and doing both and neither. For myth is a double system and 'myth is a value, truth is no guarantee for it, nothing prevents it from being a perpetual alibi'. In its desire to both 'bury and praise' its 'honoured' texts, the canon does seem 'a sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning and its form'. It also always has 'an "elsewhere" at its disposal'. Moreover in its assumption of durable quality, a 'timelessness' proved paradoxically by the test of time, 'the canon' conforms further to Barthes' identification of myth as both 'stolen language' and 'depoliticised speech', a perfect foil for Barthes' barb, that with myth 'things appear to mean something by themselves' (cf, The Great Tradition).

Mythologies is itself predicated on a contingent, historical, fabricated reality, that of postwar France and its observable cultural predilections: this Barthes later summed up as 'the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature'. Barthes very much puts practice ahead of theory, constituting the book of 54 field observations. To this he added, as literally an afterword, *Myth Today*, 'this particular essay at the end of the book', his attempt 'to define contemporary myth in methodical fashion'. Ironically it is this essay, together with a small group of standout myths that has lasted best, stood the canonical test of time. I speak critically rather than commercially, since in that respect *Mythologies* has never been out of print, meriting a new 'complete' English edition in 2012. In celebrating this new edition, Sam Anderson, in *The New York Times*, wrote that 'For a book devoted almost entirely to 60-year-old pop culture, *Mythologies* feels surprisingly relevant today'.

Trading canonical for mythical status in this way does not even imply criticism. We can work through the Barthes myth too, comparing Barthes to the Eiffel Tower he so deftly 'deconstructed': 'This pure – virtually empty – sign is ineluctable *because it means everything.*'

While *Mythologies* is often made a scapegoat for the excesses of structuralist semiology and Barthes indicted for both his simple faith in it and his subsequent betrayal of it,

the truth is far more (and less) simple. The abiding 'relevance' of *Mythologies* for media education rests on the fact that it was written in the teeth of an emerging mass culture, itself predicated on appeals to common sense and human nature (and despite the time lapse that culture, though superficially transformed, is going strong). Barthes' desire 'to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there' remains all too feasible. At the same time the energy with which he does this preserves even the most obscure aspects of 1950s French life. Despite himself Barthes is displaying in *Mythologies* much of the dynamism that he would maintain for 'the new science of signs', throughout a long career:

Though the paraphernalia of mass culture gets fairly short shrift from Barthes, there is an energy about his work that redeems and refreshes his otherwise sardonic tone: all he sears, he also saves. Thus as Neil Badmington suggests: 'Although Barthes often dismissed *Mythologies* in his more mature work, it remains his most influential book. Its force has been felt across and beyond the humanities…' This, he concludes is down to Barthes' 'joy': 'Myth endures. But a euphoric alternative rages in *Mythologies*.' Rage on!

Reviewer – Pete Bennett, University of Wolverhampton