

Reviews

Visual Methods with Children and Young People, E. Stirling & D. Yamada-Rice (eds) (2015). Palgrave, 9781137402288

Unusually for a book on method, this project comes from the 'Studies in Childhood and Youth' series of Palgrave edited collections, from a new sociology of childhood perspective (its foreword is provided by the leading professorial authority in that field, Allison James). Its provenance is not, therefore, of semiotic origin, nor really from the domain of media and cultural studies though one or two of the contributors are well known in the field of New Literacies and some of the texts which are referenced throughout veer in the direction of multimodality, whilst not approaching the scope in that field of Carey Jewitt's Routledge collection nor, in the arts, of Pat Thomson's earlier work. Instead, the editors have made the conscious, and interesting decision, to debate the issues and bring these discussions work to life by approaching a series of professionals from the 'visual industries' for their perspective on working methodologically with children and young people. In the case of one or two of these professionals there is an academic inflection anyway which raises interesting questions about perspectives and framing (Kevin Walker is an academic as well as a professional, for example).

The introduction sets out the originality of the text as being its positioning between worlds and claims it is a necessary, even essential, text at a time when so many boundaries are blurring. In truth, media students seeking to learn practical methodology in the field with children and young people will find instead a carefully argued set of chapters from leading authorities in the field who tease away at the issues and debate them, drawing on series of examples from their own work. It is going to find an audience among scholars and postgraduate students who are drawn increasingly to debate method, bias, socio-cultural perspectives, the new sociology of childhood, ethics and more in the context of the changing nature of research and data collection. It is a book *about* method which debates method without offering particular guidance (there are other texts which do that), which is not to say that there are not plenty of examples which are offered and detailed in a usable, replicable way. The real point of the book is to find ways of *thinking* about visual methods which speak to the work you want to do.

The chapters which follow the introduction are divided into three sections which address, respectively: *Production and Meaning-Making*; *Re-mixing, Creativity and Mess*; and (going) *Beyond Ethics*. The first of these opens with Rowsell thinking about research as both journey and story, a situation which produces the essential tension of 'two things being equally true at the same time'. Placing this in the foreground of the book announces to

the reader that we are as far from positivist quantitative research as it is possible to be; the making of meaning in visual research is contingent and contextual and not a random controlled trial of any kind. Each of the chapters that follow illustrate this in different ways, from an account of meaning production in movement through specific spaces and locations (Hackett and Yamada-Rice's writing on Japanese children and walking maps) to explorations of power and space (Procter and Hatton on children's den building and more). Artists, toy designers and others in visual culture fields are invited in Yamada-Rice's final chapter in this section to comment on the issues and introduce a discursive element around meaning-making. There is an argument around these issues which seeks to challenge assumptions about capabilities and the manipulation of visual culture by younger learners. It sits at some distance from the other content and needs work on the part of the reader to draw it together. More space devoted to it, perhaps in some kind of web-based follow-up would make the connections more explicit.

Parry's chapter on 'mess' resulting from arts-based approaches with children opens the section on remixing and creativity and tackles the agency issue by examining production as research, arguing that the act of taking apart and putting back together locates the work in culture. The essence of research is the creation of new knowledge, which, Parry suggests, involves a negotiation with wider lived experience. The message she wants to pass on is to abandon the eye-tracking software and start to live with mess and uncertainty in visual research. Indeed, in the chapter that follows, Claisse and Sun locate creativity and play itself as the area for finding common ground between academics and practitioners in which research can be re-imagined. Stirling reports in the 'dialogue' chapter on musicians and visual designers who argue, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the essence of their work is to 'rework' and continually undertake 'interpretation'. The challenge is to look for corollaries in research design and to consider whether or not this is even possible. Again, the book raises the questions but does not provide the answer.

The final section brings us up against ethics and their place in the design and re-imagining of research through visual methods. The claim here, from Wood, is the possibility of cultural nuance being realised in visual methods. The problematisation of this in the context of ethics is taken up by Hall in relation to 'using' children's drawings and by Hall (M.), Pahl and Pool in the context of several projects in which children were positioned as researchers of their own lives. Here the text confronts some the clichés about such research choices and explores implicit power relations. Once again, there are no easy answers as industry experts ponder their own positioning in the final chapter of this section.

It is left to Jackie Marsh, a pioneer in the field of visual research with children and young people to draw the strands together in the concluding chapter. She does this by pointing to the challenging and discursive nature of much of the work and many of the projects related by the various authors. This is the main interest of the book; it is not a research primer at all, it is a companion to those kinds of texts, an essential and interesting critical reflection on a growing area of research, drawing on experts in the field, and, uniquely, offering industry partners and opportunity to join the conversation.

Reviewer – John Potter, UCL Institute of Education

**Keywords, Raymond Williams (1976, expanded 1983).
Fourth Estate (2014), 9780006861508**



Laughey's Canon

Editor's note: This review is part of our series in which a current media teacher 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.

This re-appraisal of Williams' text takes the form of a call for a new kind of 'reimagining'.

Keywords - A Vocabulary of culture and society (Williams 1976, 1983) was often a first encounter for students with a Marxist analysis of culture. Personally, the book was very important to me. As part of the first undergraduate cohort in Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham and a refugee from its English Department, the book not only documented a 'shared body of words and meanings' but contextualised their history in an accessible 'living' (dialectical?) way, implying that contestations over their meanings still might and could go on. (In contrast Verso's *Aesthetics and Politics: Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Brecht, Lukacs* (1980) seemed hard and heavy: a series of epistles from another age.)

In his article about *Keywords'* inspiration for a 2014 exhibition at Tate Liverpool, *Art, Culture and Society in 1980s Britain*, Andy Beckett suggests 'the open-endedness of *Keywords* prevents it from seeming dated. Its highly personal, impatient, connection-seeking style fits the internet age well.' And therein lies its most obvious value to media teachers in this century. Unlike Barthes' *Mythologies*, *Keywords'* definitions and cross references were written in such a way as to encourage the reader to make connections (ripe for

hyperlinking) between each definition, as if reading the book enacted a Marxist analysis of 'culture and society'.

How much is Williams' text taught today in media education? Certainly his 'dominant, residual and emergent' ideas (Williams, 1980) are a useful way of conceptualising cultural change and representation, as 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1977) can articulate a lived experience of over an abstract idea of 'zeitgeist' just as 'Culture is ordinary' (Williams, 1989 [1958]) in his essay of the same name, also articulates a grasp of culture as a living tradition rather than a set of imposed values, what do take from *Keywords* that you can't get from Blackwell Reference Online's *Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory?* (Payne, ed. 1997). Its power surely lies in its etymological approach, showing how not only current understandings of words have been very different than past understandings but that there have been political fights over the correct meaning. Following Hall (2015) and Shukaitis & Graeber (2007), who both outline the relevance Autonomist Marxism can add to traditional Marxist thought, we need to stress less the material dominance of capital over social life than the agency of labour to drive change for itself.

For many students in the 1980s, many of whom are now media educators, Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) was a first encounter with French theory, what seemed audaciously un-academic examples from popular culture whether the sign articulated as 'Roman-ness' in film or 'patriotic like steak' to articulate complex workings of consumerist ideology, to arrive at the undiluted 'theory' section at the back:

It is now possible to complete the semiological definition of myth in a bourgeois society: *myth is depoliticized speech*. One must naturally understand political in its deeper meaning, as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world; one must above all give an active value to the prefix de-: here it represents an operational movement, it permanently embodies a defaulting. (1957: 42)

Bennett & McDougall (2013) edited a contemporary re-imagining in *Barthes' Mythologies Today*. Similarly, Bennett et al, a decade ago, offered *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, updating and expanding Williams' text to include 'the virtual' and 'the West'.

But do we need to put *Keywords* to work in another way? How might such another 'reimagining' take shape?

'q.v.: for which see elsewhere.' Media beyond the neoliberal imaginary: Raymond Williams' *Keywords* as web-based videos?

‘Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.’

Margaret Thatcher, 1979

‘Those who control the present, control the past and those who control the past control the future.’

George Orwell, 1948

‘A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism.’

Karl Marx, 1848

Might this be a proposition more of a handbook to ‘weaponise’ Marxist analysis? Inspired by the work of Barbagallo, in particular, and following ideas of ‘making visible’ in Milburn, ‘futures’ in Fisher and Gilbert and the glossary of Plan C (references and links below), might we propose digitally reanimating Williams’ text to look beyond both the neoliberal imaginary and academic discourse? How might a simple digital storytelling approach be valuable? Following on from CEMP’s *Spirit of 13* project, students could be asked to script and film a series of web-based videos. This could work in the name of plan c – starting out with comments in response to *What the f**k is social reproduction?* Perhaps, or as a parallel project, as with *We Are All Very Anxious*.

To be continued.

Reviewer – Ben Andrews, University of Wolverhampton

References

- Bennett, P. & McDougall, J. 2013. ‘Barthes’ Mythologies Today’: In *Readings of Contemporary Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bloch et al 1980. *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates Between Bloch, Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno*. London: Verso.
- Beckett, A. 2014. *Keywords, Raymond Williams Battles Language*: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/feb/15/keywords-raymond-williams-battles-language> [accessed November 2015].
- Barbagallo, C. 2015: *What the f**k is social reproduction? An introduction by Plan C*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apO3B_o6dz8&feature=youtu.be [accessed November 2015].
- Hall, R. 2015. ‘The Implications of Autonomist Marxism for Research and Practice in Education and Technology’. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 40(1), 106-22.
- Fisher, M. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?* [CITY MISSING]: Zero Books.
- Fisher, M. & Gilbert, J. 2014. *Reclaim Modernity: Beyond Markets Beyond Machines*. Available at: http://www.compassonline.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Compass-Reclaiming-Modernity-Beyond-markets_-2.pdf [accessed November 2015].

Institute for Precarious Consciousness: *We Are All Very Anxious* Available at: <http://www.weareplanc.org/blog/we-are-all-very-anxious/>

Milburn, K. 2015. *On Social Strikes and Directional Demands*. Available at: <http://www.weareplanc.org/blog/on-social-strikes-and-directional-demands/> [accessed November 2015].

Payne, M. (ed.). 1997. *Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Blackwell Reference Online.

Plan C glossary <http://www.weareplanc.org/blog/glossary/> [accessed November 2015].

Shukaitis, S. & Graeber, D. 'Introduction' in Shukaitis, S. 2007. *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations // Collective Theorization*. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/422956/Constituent_Imagination_Militant_Investigations_Collective_Theorization [accessed November 2015].

Williams, R. 1989 [1958]. 'Culture is Ordinary', in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*. London: Verso.

Williams, R. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: OUP.

Williams, R. 1980. 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Theory' in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*. London: Verso.

Williams, R. 2014 [1976, 1983]. *Keywords – A Vocabulary of culture and society*. London: Fourth Estate.

Possible resources of emergent media:

<http://novaramedia.com/category/tv/>

<http://roarmag.org/>

<https://viewpointmag.com/>

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk>

<https://twitter.com/50500d>

<https://twitter.com/oDTransform>

<https://twitter.com/thecolumndotnet>

<http://scarfolk.blogspot.co.uk/>

The Centre for Media Practice: *Spirit of 13*: <http://www.cemp.ac.uk/spiritof13/>