

# 1 WHAT IS MEDIA LITERACY?

## INTRODUCTION: POTTER-LITERACIES

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IONA: If he killed spiders in the movie everybody wouldn't like him because he'd be a coldblooded killer. You have to keep Harry Potter as nice as possible.

OGEDEI: Yeah but Harry Potter's like sad, he's just like such a little, um, um, he's like a teacher's pet, he's just running around doing this stuff. ... I'd like it if he could get better spells –

IONA: Like Avadakedavra, the killing spell?

OGEDEI: No, like flame, like a flamethrower [*laughs*]

These two 13-year-olds are talking about Harry Potter in a research session which invited **ten children** to participate on the basis that they were familiar with the book (Rowling, 1998), film (Colombus, 2002) and computer game (Electronic Arts, 2002) of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. The conversation raises a number of issues about literacy generally, and media literacy specifically.

Literacy is *cultural*: these children are all involved, in different ways, with the cultural phenomenon of Harry Potter. They are intimately acquainted with the popular myth of Harry Potter, have invested time and energy in it, owe it various kinds of allegiance, see it as representative of values and ideas they find important.

Literacy is *critical*: it is about taste and pleasure, and the kinds of judgements these involve. For Ilana, Harry's 'niceness' is appealing, and she sees him as an admirable figure, heroic and courageous. For Ogedei, 'he's like a teacher's pet', too good, too complicit with adult authority, too much like the kind of boy Ogedei increasingly doesn't want to be. This suggests that critical judgement, pleasure and taste are often intricately bound up with identity: our judgements and tastes are public expressions of the kind of person we are, we are becoming, we hope to be. There is also a conceptual grasp of how the text works: Ilana's argument that Harry has to be 'as nice as possible' shows an understanding of his narrative role as hero, and how it connects with its audience, how

they need sympathy for a protagonist. The understandings and judgements at work here roam across three media forms, finding both commonalities across them and critical differences between them.

Literacy is transformative and *creative*. It does not simply involve understanding a text – it involves, to different degrees, remaking that text. This always involves internal mental operations, to which teachers, psychologists, academics and literacy experts have no direct access. Their job begins the moment the transformative work becomes externalised, most immediately as speech, but later as writing, drama, visual design and so on. In this interview, though, it appears to be about what we traditionally think of as response, Ogedei's last remarks give us a clue about the transformative process. He imagines Harry Potter with a flamethrower, a proper action hero instead of the lame substitute he perceives.

We have highlighted these features – *cultural*, *critical* and *creative* – because they are common to many emerging definitions of media literacy at the time we write this book, and because, for that reason, we have adopted them within our own model of media literacy, which we outline in Table 1.1. Nevertheless, any attempt to clarify and simplify such a complex set of practices must also recognise how contested all definitions are, and how different the different interests and perspectives of teachers, researchers and policymakers can pull in different directions.

What are teachers to make of this complex, shifting world of warring definitions, half-realised policies and widely divergent practices? We have taught, over the past ten years, many young people whose differing interests and needs make such abstract notions even more complex. Megan, who loved the textuality of the media, and at 15 showed round the vice-chancellor of a local university, explaining to him what film semiotics meant. Sam, who hated reading and writing, and was even bored and disillusioned by the challenges of digital video editing, but who knew the script of *Robocop* so well he could mouth the lines a split second before the onscreen characters uttered them. Alex, for whom the creative endeavour of digital video production was a passion, and who is studying for a degree in Media Studies at the University of Westminster at the time of writing.

Teaching is an oscillation between the complicated lived experience of working with teenagers like these, and the distanced, reflective exploration of the principles that underlie how we work with them. We hope to throw some light on this oscillation as we work through the examples of media literacy represented in this book, emerging from our work with children and young people over the past ten years. We will present, in this chapter, a summative outline of our working model of media literacy. This provisional model incorporates many elements others have proposed, but with some changes of emphasis and some re-combination of different schema. For the sake of clarity,

we make no attempt to include every possible element here, but select those which are most pertinent to our own work – media education in schools.

## THE LITERACY METAPHOR

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The term *media literacy* is in many ways unsatisfactory. As both Kress (2003) and Buckingham (2003) have pointed out, it is irrevocably related to language, it becomes something more metaphorical when applied to other media and it doesn't make sense in languages where the term used is even more literally print-related, as in the French term *alphabétisme*. Indeed, it simply does not translate into some other languages, so that educators outside the Anglophone world who wish to employ the concept sometimes use the phrase 'media literacy' in English.

However, we believe that the term is useful for three reasons. First, it is not easy to think of another term which would serve a similar purpose and be somehow more accurate. Such expressions as 'communicative competence' (Germany and Austria also have the term *medien kompetenz*, for instance) emphasise functional skills at the expense of cultural factors. 'Literacy' implies cultural competence. It is something we use to claim membership of particular social groups, whether these be players of the online roleplaying game *World of Warcraft*, aficionados of the films of Ken Loach or the Harry Potter fan club. These kinds of affiliation may be rooted in claims of cultural value or in common experiences of pleasure, but they are all connected to social identities, and part of our efforts to be a particular kind of person moving in a particular kind of social world.

Secondly, media literacy is not simply (or not only) a metaphor, but draws attention to important connections between print literacy and the way people engage with the media. These connections are present at all points of the three-part conceptual structure media education is often seen to operate: *institution, text, audience*. Institutions imply the study of how media texts are produced, the political and economic contexts from which they emerge, the messages their producers intend them to convey. Texts suggest the 'languages' of the media: how they represent the world, how they use particular structures or grammars to form these representations, how they are composed. Audiences are, of course, the counterparts of producers, traditionally seen as consumers of media texts, and can be studied in terms of their social uses of the media, their tastes and pleasures and their interpretive strategies. This is a simple explanation of this three-part structure; needless to say, life is more complicated than this, and we will return to these ideas later. Institutions and audiences are typically not attended to by traditional literary studies in

schools, but there is every reason to argue that they should be. Literature is also produced by commercial publishing houses as well as authors, after all, and marketed in similar ways to films or computer games – indeed, as the Harry Potter example shows, such marketing may extend across a corporate franchise. Similarly, of course, literature addresses audiences, who make particular social uses of their reading, develop allegiances, even fan cultures, and build what reader-response theory calls ‘interpretive communities’. In respect of the ‘text’ part of this structure, there are also important, literal, connections between print and other media. The conversation about Harry Potter, for instance, included a discussion of the system of ‘person’ in book, game and film. The point here is not to flatten out the different modes in question, but to explore how they all deal with the choices texts have between looking *at* a character in the fictional world, or looking at this world *through* that character’s eyes. This involves seeing the common features here: books, games and films all have some equivalent of ‘first-person’ and ‘third-person’. But it also involves seeing what is specific to each medium: a ‘third-person’ game, for instance, still involves being close to, and controlling, the protagonist, and so it has some ‘first-person’ characteristics. To be literate, then, involves understanding the grammar of a text, at least implicitly. It is interesting here that the Slovakian term for media literacy is *medialna gramotnost*, a term in which ‘grammar’ combines the idea of language structures with a broader concept of ‘educatedness’.

Finally, ‘media literacy’ is a useful general shorthand for a complex set of phenomena which would otherwise be very difficult to talk about in the policy arena, which we must constantly keep in mind. Media literacy means something in the UK in the contexts of the National Curriculum, the BBC and OFCOM, the media super-regulator. Of course, it means something slightly different in all these cases, and something different again to media teachers; but the debate about what it means for children to learn about books, films, comics and computer games can at least take place under the general umbrella of media literacy. Beyond the UK, there is a long history of campaigning in Europe for recognition of the importance of media literacy by the member states of the European Union, while in the Anglophone world media literacy is a banner for campaigns for media education in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and (though rather differently inflected) the United States.

For all these reasons, we prefer, with the obvious qualifications, to keep the term *media literacy*, and this book is our way to elaborate how it can be made to mean something in practice and in research.

However, before moving on to look at more specific questions related to media literacy, some additional points need to be made. First, the notion of expanding the concept of literacy to apply to other modes of communication has been well rehearsed over the past ten years or so. In some ways this debate has been parallel to the debate about media literacy, linked with it but distinct.

It is best represented, perhaps, by the notion of *multiliteracies* (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000), which poses a notion of literacy broader than media literacy, in that it encompasses all semiotic modes; and also in that it relates literacy to new technologies, a point we will discuss in more detail below.

Media literacy, then, may be best conceived as a subset of multiliteracy, applicable to mass media forms in particular. Within media literacy, it is also possible to conceive of even more specific forms of literacy. There is a well-established notion of *moving image literacy* (Burn and Leach, 2004), as well as its variant, *cine-literacy*, proposed by the British Film Institute, and emphasising the cultural value of film (FEWG, 1999). By contrast, Buckingham proposed some time ago a notion of *television literacy*, encompassing the forms of critical ‘reading’ young people display in viewing television (Buckingham, 1993). Similarly, we have been engaged for three years in a research project one of whose aims is to develop a model of *game literacy* (Burn, forthcoming). These ‘literacies’ can be seen as subsets of media literacy, just as media literacy can be seen as a subset of multiliteracy, or simply of ‘literacy’ more generally, in its expanded form.

These models are by no means straightforward or uncontested and we will explore some of them further in the course of this book. However, one final point about the adequacy of the literacy metaphor remains to be made. The idea of literacy persists partly because it often seems appropriate. Media forms often behave in ways comparable to print texts: marks are arranged on paper, or on timelines in editing software; the principles and processes by which these signs are selected and combined often look like a kind of writing. These forms of composition seem to require certain skills, and they result in the making of meaning through practices of inscription, like writing. Similarly, they can be ‘read’ – the signs can be decoded, the texts can be analysed, the forms of representation can be understood, engaged with, enjoyed in ways analogous to the reading of print in general and literature more specifically.

However, there are times when the literacy metaphor seems less appropriate. Sometimes the process of meaning-making and composition does not obviously resemble the fixity of print. While editing digital video can feel like making a filmic ‘sentence’, using a camera to film the footage in the first place can feel much more fluid, much more improvisatory, much more like taking part in a performance. Making a media text often literally involves performance. Young people play dramatic roles in the videos they make; they use dramatic voices for animated and computer game characters; they play roles using game avatars.

These forms of communication and representation resemble print literacy less than they resemble traditions of oral composition and performance. The scholar of language, literacy and literature Walter Ong laments the demise of oral traditions as print literacy comes to dominate the cultures of developed

societies; but he also argues that residues of oral culture persist, and even transmute into new forms through new technologies of communication, a phenomenon he terms ‘secondary orality’ (Ong, 1982). This notion has been developed to account for forms of speechlike writing in new media, characterised again by improvisation, immediacy and ephemerality (Lanham, 1993). The differences between written and oral modes of communication are memorably represented by the linguist MAK Halliday:

The complexity of the written language is its density of substance, solid like that of a diamond formed under pressure. By contrast, the complexity of spoken language is its intricacy of movement, liquid like that of a rapidly running river. To use a behavioural analogy, the structure of spoken language is of a choreographic kind. (1989: 87)

We aim to keep Halliday’s metaphor firmly in view. Where the literacy metaphor is most apt, whether at a general or a specific level, we will develop it. However, where the engagement with, or making of, a media text seems better described in terms of dramatic performance, roleplay, improvisation and dialogue, we will invoke the idea of orality.

## EVOLVING MODELS OF MEDIA LITERACY

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Notions of media literacy, and the processes of media education that aim to develop such literacy, are well-developed, not least in Buckingham’s comprehensive account *Media Education* (2003). In the UK, the British Film Institute has also been influential in developing models of media literacy, and more specifically a subset that focuses on film, which they have termed cine-literacy (FEWG, 1999). We will explore this subset more closely in Chapter 5.

However, the notion of media literacy exists beyond the world of media studies and media education. In recent years it has developed a high profile in policy arenas around the world, essentially in response to the growth of new media. In many parts of the Anglophone world, ideas of media literacy are often well-established in school curricula, and typically located in English, literacy or language arts sections of the curriculum. In Europe, the idea of media literacy is receiving unprecedented attention as we write, reflected in the establishment of a media literacy initiative by the European Commission. The consultant group supporting this move emerges from many different national contexts. In some cases, Italy and France, for instance, these began with national traditions of film culture. They are all moving, however, at different rates, towards a recognition of the need for children to learn about all media, of children’s immersion in media cultures and of the growth of new media,

especially computer games and the Internet. In our view, there is a danger that the prime function of media education – learning *about* the media – becomes confused with the new possibilities of e-learning, which is something quite different – learning *through* the media (Buckingham, 2003). We will return to this question in the final chapter. Nevertheless, this new urgency for the development of Europe-wide common approaches to media literacy is obviously welcome.

In the UK, the new super-regulator OFCOM has a remit to develop media literacy. Shortly after its formation in 2004, it published a consultation paper with a draft definition of media literacy, and subsequently decided on a three-part working definition, derived from earlier models (Aufderheide, 1997): *Access, Understand, Create* (OFCEM, 2005). In many respects this is a positive development for media educators in the UK. It represents the first solid policy commitment to the importance of media literacy, indicated in advance of a seminar in London by the words of Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell:

I believe that in the modern world media literacy will become as important a skill as maths or science. Decoding our media will be as important to our lives as citizens as understanding great literature is to our cultural lives. (UK Film Council press release, January 2004)

Furthermore, the inclusion in OFCOM's model of the 'create' element shows a welcome recognition of creative production as part of media literacy, which is a central theme of this book.

There are, however, some criticisms to be made of the OFCOM model. In their policy paper on media literacy (OFCEM, 2005) there is a recurrent emphasis on the function of digital media to provide information, and a corresponding neglect of functions such as narrative, fantasy, roleplay, social networking, which are arguably the functions most important to young people, and the functions we emphasise in this book. By the same token, the emphasis on information erodes the cultural aspects of media literacy: the word 'culture' appears nowhere in this paper. By contrast, we see media literacy as invariably culturally located. In some ways these restrictions are consequent upon OFCOM's general brief, which does not include all media: print media, film and computer games (except, perhaps, as online activities) are beyond its remit.

Debates about media literacy, then, reveal both consensus and division. On the one hand, there is a wide degree of consensus about what media literacy is at a general level, in particular that it involves both a critical understanding of media texts as well as a creative ability to produce them. This consensus is now well-established in the UK, and to some extent in Europe.

On the other hand, there is considerable debate about more specific aspects

of what media literacy might be. Its cultural dimension means for some countries a promotion of heritage film culture, for others a commitment to popular culture across different media. The nature of ‘critical understanding’ varies between a suspicious, critical reading of information media to a more appreciative reading of the aesthetic properties of audiovisual texts. The emphasis on production is stronger in some versions, weaker in others; and the nature and purpose of this kind of ‘creativity’ differs widely from one interpretation to another. The relative importance of different media forms varies between stakeholders: for policymakers at the present time, the perceived opportunities and threats of the Internet are central; for advocates of particular media, such as the BFI, their institutional commitment to moving image culture is crucial; for representatives of media industries, whether print media or computer games, their commercial imperative provides the focus.

What we hope to achieve with our model (Table 1.1) is, first, an accommodation with the most popular current approaches. The central ‘trunk’ which we identified at the beginning of this chapter – cultural, creative, critical – is deliberately aligned with an emerging consensus in Europe about the key features of media literacy (these features are emphasised in Table 1.1). However, we want to elaborate this model in certain ways. The cultural contexts on the left are drawn from the academic tradition of Cultural Studies, which has been influential in the UK in explaining how people engage with the media, and, indeed, on how the function of media education in schools has been understood. On the right, what we have called semiotic processes are largely derived from the tradition of social semiotics which has influenced thinking about language and literacy in the Anglophone world.

Needless to say, this model looks a lot neater than the ragged messiness of actual practice. It does not represent a rigid orthodoxy we have enacted over the past ten years. Rather, it is an analytical tool, an attempt to pull together, describe and explain what we have tried to do in teaching and research, and what the children we have taught have produced and learnt. Its neatness belies persistent uncertainties, continuing aspirations, risky improvisations and the ever-present unpredictability of how teenagers use and engage with the media.

In this spirit, we will move on to explain our thinking behind this model, around which the rest of the book is structured.

TABLE 1.1 Media literacy: a cultural-semiotic model

<b>Cultural contexts</b>	<b>Social functions</b>	<b>Semiotic processes</b>
Lived	<b>Cultural</b>	Discourse
Selective	<b>Creative</b>	Design/Production
Recorded	<b>Critical</b>	Distribution
		Interpretation

### Cultural contexts

Thirteen years ago, in *Cultural Studies Goes to School* (1994), David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green argued that the insights of Cultural Studies needed to be applied to the purpose and practice of media education, and gave examples of how this might work.

In many ways our book is a successor to Buckingham and Sefton-Green's. Like theirs, it is written by a teacher and an academic, working for a synthesis of practice and research (but also productively confusing the two categories). Like theirs, it argues the case for popular culture as a legitimate field of study. Like theirs, it exemplifies a model of media education which now attracts a wide international consensus. And, like theirs, it recognises the contribution made by the Cultural Studies tradition to our understanding of the ways in which people engage with the media, and the significance of the texts they themselves make. Cultural Studies here refers generally to the academic discipline usually seen as beginning in Britain with the establishment in the 1970s of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University.

Culture is a paradoxical idea in education. On the one hand, schools are full of it. Parkside, like many schools, abounds in music, from madrigal groups to rock bands; it holds art shows in local pubs, dance and drama shows, school plays and talent shows, which showcase the widest variety of creative forms imaginable, from rap to piano compositions based on the computer game *Final Fantasy 10*. In addition, it promotes the media arts, through animation, film-making, computer game authoring and a variety of multimedia work.

On the other hand, the idea of culture is curiously absent in the documents of the UK's National Curriculum. In the provision for the 14–16 age group, for example, culture in Art and English seems to mean, effectively, multiculturalism: attention to 'different cultures and traditions' (QCA, National Curriculum programme of study for EN2, Reading). There is no sense of the pervasiveness of popular culture in the lives of young people, and no sense of all art, language and literature as cultural.

So it is still an urgent task for media education to argue for the place of popular culture in schools. Cultural Studies has been, in its short life, preoccupied with the politics of popular culture, presenting it as the culture of an oppressed working class, at one moment a consolation in the leisure breaks of industrial labour, at another a transformative force in which people can use its symbolic resources to make a better life. Its classical studies of the so-called 'spectacular' youth subcultures of postwar Britain, from Teddy-boys to punk (Clarke et al., 1976), have more recently given way to less deterministic theories of youth culture, which pay attention to its fragmentary, fluid nature and to the relationship between global and local cultures (Thornton, 1995; Bennett, 2000). We will revisit these later formulations in subsequent chapters. However,

in our model of media literacy we want to return to first principles, and one of the founding thinkers of Cultural Studies, the cultural and literary theorist Raymond Williams.

Williams proposed a three-part view of culture which we consider appropriate for media education, and which forms the first part of our model. Williams was one of the first thinkers in the tradition of English literary studies to take a largely positive view of popular culture, from comics to television. He conceived of this in the context of a 'lived culture', a social definition of culture 'in which culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour' (Williams, 1961: 41). It is this which has led to the close attention to popular culture in the Cultural Studies tradition, which in turn has informed the practices of media education.

Alongside the lived culture, Williams identified two other levels: the culture of the 'selective tradition' and the 'recorded culture'. The first of these he saw as the product of a gradual process to build ideal and universal cultural values. The second, he proposed, was the process by which the study of culture attempted to reconstruct a partial picture of the lived culture of a former society through the documentary record.

The culture of the selective tradition poses problems, of course, in the light of long battles in recent years over canonicity in the English curriculum in particular: the resistance by many teachers to imposed canons of literary texts which are often traced back to the 'Great Tradition' promoted by F.R. Leavis and his associates (Leavis, 1948), whose stance Williams was firmly opposing. Traditionally, both media education and Cultural Studies have dismissed the selective tradition, identifying it with elite culture, and with the oppressive function of dominant social groups. For us, however, the selective tradition needs to be considered by teachers and students, though not because it represents 'certain absolute or universal values', as Williams argued. Rather, we adopt the account of Hodge and Kress (1988), who argue that culturally valued texts become so through a historical accretion of competing commentary. It is this continuing process which, we believe, students can benefit from taking part in. In the context of media education, the 'selective tradition' can be seen over a relatively short timescale. For instance, in Chapter 5 we will look at what it means for students now to work on Hitchcock's *Psycho*, once a popular shocker, now a revered cult classic.

The notion of the recorded culture offers the possibility of cultural history as an approach to be used in media education. Media literacy is sometimes presented as if it only applies to the contemporary moment, and is apparently a-historical; the OFCOM document, for instance, contains only references to the electronic media of its particular historical moment. However, media literacy is, for us, inconceivable without history. And the personal history of an

individual merges indistinctly into the history of a decade, a half-century; and by extension into family history, a century. The Masters' students we teach at the Institute of Education are sometimes asked to construct a 'media autobiography', which throws up personal involvement in the history of punk music, Gothic lifestyle, French ska, 80s New Romantic music and so on. Similarly, in our work at Parkside we have encountered young people who have learned to use a Playstation from their grandparents, who have re-discovered the music of Jimi Hendrix, who have developed an interest in the 1930s horror films of the Universal studios. All of these examples show how the 'recorded culture' of the past can be rediscovered, revalued, profitably researched, even reintegrated in 'retro-cultural' elements of the 'lived culture'. In our view, then, the recorded culture is not necessarily the desiccated record of vanished communities (though the greater the distance in time, the more it becomes so). Rather, the recorded culture is intimately related to the contemporary moment: it is the history out of which the lived culture emerges.

These, then, are the cultural contexts we borrow from Williams – the landscapes, backdrops, broad accounts of different approaches to culture we consider important and legitimate. The question of *why* these cultures are important and *what* people do with them in the context of media literacy forms part of our next category: social functions.

### **Social functions**

What we have called social functions, which we want to see as central to our model, echoes the '3-Cs' model of media literacy we have referred to above, and which is gaining popularity as we write. For instance, a Charter for Media Literacy produced by a Media Literacy Task Force in the UK (representing broadcasters and relevant agencies, including the BFI and the UK Film Council) presents an outline of media literacy which emphasises cultural, critical and creative functions. A version of this charter is currently being distributed by a Europe-wide campaign. In the field of academic literacy studies, there is a long tradition in Australia of similar models, such as Green's (1988), which argues for a three-part model: operational, cultural and critical.

Media literacy, then, has a *cultural function*: it is about the cultural practices in which we engage. These are too various to rehearse here: the academic tradition of Cultural Studies has focused on media cultures such as those we look at in this book, but also on cultural practices as diverse as clothing, body-piercing and skateboarding. Media cultures, in this sense, are only a part of a much wider cultural landscape.

The cultural practices of media literacy also have a wide range of purposes and we will explore these in subsequent chapters as they apply to students and teachers working together. Here, we will emphasise one, because it is so pervasive

and so important in the contexts of young people and learning: the development of identity. Buckingham and Sefton-Green relate the interpretation and making of texts to cultural contexts in which the tastes, pleasures and critical opinions of young people are developed, and along with them, their sense of self, which Buckingham and Sefton-Green theorise in characteristically post-structuralist terms as multiple and shifting, diverse and contradictory (1994: 30). In the same kind of way, we will see engagement with the media as part of wider cultural complexes of taste, pleasure and critical engagement, in which social identities are built and negotiated. A conception of selfhood useful in relation to media literacy is the one proposed by Jerome Bruner. Bruner's position, from the perspective of what he describes as 'cultural psychology', is that we need to pay attention to two central aspects of selfhood. First, 'the meanings in terms of which Self is defined both by the individual and by the culture in which he or she participates'. Secondly, 'the practices in which "the meanings of Self" are achieved and put to use' (Bruner, 1990: 116). This allows for a conception and study of identities which are *negotiated* (between the individual and the culture) and *distributed* (throughout the individual's cultural world and its other inhabitants). An apt metaphor for media educators might be the UK television gameshow *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* Success here depends not on knowledge as a hermetically sealed repository inside the skull of the individual contestant. Rather, memory, guesswork and informed hunches are integrated with dialogue with others in the show's 'lifelines': 'Ask the Audience', and 'Phone a Friend'.

The examples we use in later chapters of media production work by young people can be seen in terms of Bruner's negotiated and distributed selfhood. Sometimes they are obvious 'practices of self', such as Sophie's comicstrip superheroine in Chapter 3, which experiments with fantasy projections of self. At other times they represent the tastes, interests, pleasures, knowledge and expertise which contribute to selfhood and the social identities which, in adolescence, are such malleable constructions, like items in a drama wardrobe, tried on for size. While literate practices, even broadly defined as work with image as well as text, game as well as video, multimedia as well as print, are obvious tools for the construction of such experimental identities, the wardrobe metaphor reminds us again that literacy is not always the best image. In many ways this kind of self-representation is more like the kind of dramatic performance proposed by Erving Goffman (1959).

Bruner raises another question in his consideration of self: the question of *agency*, or agency: the extent to which the individual has control over his or her identity, cultural circumstances, forms of social action, ideas and beliefs. The idea of agency leads easily enough into the second of our social functions of media literacy: *creative functions*. An essential element of our idea of creativity is the capacity of the creative act to transform the creator. In

making something valuable, worthwhile, new, we change our sense of ourselves, whether through representing some aspect of ourselves in what we have made, or in our altered sense of what we can do. We want to indicate a change of priorities in placing the creative function of media literacy before the critical function. Traditionally, it has always seemed the other way round: we read the media before we make the media; we develop a critical understanding which we then consolidate by making our own texts. Indeed, media education historically develops from literary studies, which is a purely analytical discipline with no interest in creative production.

However, in recent years there has been a marked shift in emphasis from *critique* to *production*. Influential research in the practice of media education has reflected this, including *Cultural Studies Goes to School* and later work by the same authors (Buckingham et al., 1995; Buckingham, 2003, Sefton-Green, 1999), as well as by others, such as McDougall's account of media education practice (McDougall, 2006), a series of BFI studies in production work (Parker, 1999; Sefton-Green and Parker, 2000) and our own work (Burn and Reed, 1999; Burn et al., 2001; Burn and Durran, 2006). This shift is influenced by many factors, most importantly changing attitudes to the relations between production work and analytical work, the advent of accessible and affordable digital authoring tools (which we explore in more detail in Chapter 8) and a closer association between media education and the Arts, especially in the context, in the UK, of Media Arts specialist schools like Parkside. In this book, then, the emphasis is strongly on creative production, out of which different forms of critical understanding can emerge.

From the semiotic viewpoint we will explore in relation to the third component of our model, creativity is about the three overarching functions of all forms of cultural production: representation, communication and the composition of coherent texts. However, it also relates to current debates about the nature of the creative act in relation to education. In this respect, creativity is a vague and confused term, variously appearing as post-Romantic conceptions of artistic genius (Scruton, 1987), psychological accounts of the cognitive mechanisms of creative thought (Boden, 1990), cultural notions of 'grounded aesthetic work' (Willis, 1990), or policy notions of the collaborative problem-solving skills necessary for new kinds of workforce (Leadbeater, 2000). Our approach to creativity draws on the work of the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, for whom the creativity of children was closely related to play (Vygotsky, [1931] 1998, 1978). In playful activity, children learn the meaning of symbolic substitution through the manipulation of physical objects: so a broomstick becomes a horse, to use Vygotsky's example. These symbolic understandings become internalised and develop into the mental processes which generate creative work. We will explore (particularly in Chapter 2, in the context of children's animation work) how such creative work draws on

children's cultural resources, how it depends on social forms of learning, and how creativity is linked to intellectual development, rather than being something mysteriously separate from it.

Bruner's notion of agency also leads into the third of our social functions: the *critical functions* of media literacy. A greater degree of agency would seem to depend on a greater ability to read texts critically. Like Bruner, Buckingham and Sefton-Green tread a careful path in their consideration of the autonomy of young readers. They point to the dangers of one tendency of Cultural Studies, to celebrate the power of readers to turn media texts to their purposes. This kind of cultural populism paralyses any form of cultural politics – if all readers are automatically capable of critical and transformative reading there is no further debate to be had about the power of media messages and the media industries. Similarly, there is no further role for education.

However, while recognising this danger, it is important not to lose one of the central benefits of the Cultural Studies tradition, which is to focus attention on the real audiences of soap operas, disco music, horror comics, punk, hip-hop and other popular forms, demonstrating empirically that these audiences are far from the 'passive dupes' of the media assumed by earlier thinkers and educators.

This debate is still with us. Buckingham and Sefton-Green have more recently presented an account of how children engage with the media in which they frame the question in terms of the classical sociological opposition between structure and agency (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2004). Drawing on the outcomes of an international research project looking at how children engaged with the cross-media craze of Pokémon, they argue that neither pole can be assumed to be the case. Children's identities, beliefs and behaviour are not automatically determined by structures of political and economic power, ideology, language or history. On the other hand, neither can we assume that they have complete control over the influences all these forces exert. The project produced evidence of children's critical and purposeful interpretations and transformations of Pokémon texts; but it also recognised that children do not always 'read through' the persuasive sales techniques built into this franchise, or its representations of childhood, culture and ethnicity.

We believe this middle path is the only sensible one. All children are different, and their experience of media cultures varies considerably, as do the processes of mentoring and informal pedagogy they have received from peers and parents. In some cases, the structures of textual messages may affect what they think and believe; in others, they may not. The kind of critical reading Buckingham and Sefton-Green are aiming for remains the kind we want: it allows for pleasure, for contingency, for negotiation of meanings in social groups and in classrooms, for diversity of taste and experience. It does not seek to police meaning or taste, but rather to open them to debate.

Critical literacy is usually seen as opposing and supplanting the kind of critical practice of literary studies in the first half of the twentieth century, and in particular the work of Leavis, which is seen to emphasise a select canon of culturally valued works, refined processes of cultural distinction and approaches to texts which largely ignored their social and political circumstances. By contrast, notions of critical literacy arising from philosophical and sociolinguistic approaches to language, discourse and power (Foucault, 1976; Fairclough, 1989) have rejected the focus on aesthetic qualities, substituting the need for critical questioning of ‘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; whose interests would be served by such representations and such readings ...’ (Morgan, 1997).

These kinds of critical practice see texts and those who produce and receive them as rhetorical systems, a stance which can be traced back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* lays the foundations of many of the practices which critical literacy proposes today. It suggests that rhetoric has *ethos* (how believable its speaker is), *pathos* (how moved the audience feel) and *logos* (the structures and meanings of the words themselves). This tripartite structure is remarkably similar to modern notions of media literacy and critical literacy such as the one described by Morgan; and indeed, modern notions of institutional context and the importance of audience can be found in current models of rhetorical studies (Bigum et al., 1998; Andrews and Haythornthwaite, 2007).

On the other hand, the emphasis in literary studies on aesthetic form and effect can be seen as deriving from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. It proposes notions of genre, form, performance and audience engagement which can still be discerned in recent debates on these topics. Most importantly, however, it proposes the category of the *aesthetic* – though very differently to the modern understanding. For Aristotle, *aisthesis* meant the sensory perception of a work of art – almost the opposite of the rarefied, refined, chilly kind of appreciation we more usually associate with ‘high art’. This curious reversal is well represented by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose *Critique of Judgement* saw aesthetic distinction as a refined faculty in which one could be educated. This form of judgement has been roundly critiqued by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984), who accuses Kant of disguising the exclusive cultural tastes of his own (bourgeois) social class as a universal form of aesthetic judgement. Bourdieu opposes this aesthetic of the ‘pure gaze’ to the visceral vitality of popular cultural tastes, legitimising the latter in terms which have been highly influential in the study of popular culture and its audiences. Needless to say, in rejecting the universality of cultural judgement proposed by Kant, Bourdieu emphasises how cultural taste is determined by specific social and historical conditions, such as our family, education and, above all, our social class.

But what might these rather elevated and abstract ideas mean in the context of young people and the media? A good example is popular horror. In Chapter 5 we give an account of a course based on horror films, in which, like Bourdieu, we aim to take this disreputable popular genre seriously, to explore young people's interest in it, and to recognise its appeal to the senses (Aristotle's *aisthesis*) as well as the intellect. A few years ago, we used an episode of the popular teenage horror series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with Year 8. This provoked a complaint from two parents, who said that their son was being corrupted by this experience. When we asked them to be more specific about their objection, they argued that the episode contained supernatural elements and was morally ambiguous. When we pointed out that, in the following year, their son would be studying Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, of which the same arguments could be made, it became clear that their arguments were in fact a rationale for a much less rational judgement: one of cultural taste. Our view, then, was that *Buffy* represented the vitality and immediacy of popular culture, which Bourdieu celebrates as dynamic and energetic. However, we also believe that the apparent opposition here between Shakespeare and *Buffy* is a sterile one: we do not need to choose, but can have both.

We propose, then, that media literacy requires something of both these approaches. It needs the 'suspicious' critical reading of the *Rhetoric*, but also the 'appreciative' reading of the *Poetics*. The two, of course, are connected. The exercise of aesthetic judgement, linked in Bourdieu's account to the distribution of power through social class and education, is never a neutral affair. On the other hand, the exploration of cultural taste and judgement in the classroom may seem less like class warfare than it once might have done. The inclusion of comicstrips, computer games and horror films as legitimate content for the curriculum, alongside Shakespeare, Dickens and Milton, sounds like a classic confrontation between elite and popular art. However, these old binary oppositions have lost at least some of their force, not least in what Connor calls the 'pick 'n' mix aesthetic' of the postmodern era (Connor, 1990). Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* successfully replaces 'bardolatry' with the MTV aesthetic; Dickens can be viewed through the medium of popular musical and film; Milton's epic themes are rehearsed in contemporary children's literature such as Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–2000). Meanwhile, popular art forms – even computer games! – are increasingly well represented in the 'respectable' critical discourses of journalistic review and the academy.

### **Semiotic processes**

The third segment of our model takes us into the nuts and bolts. If media literacy allows us to engage in cultural practices through which we make sense of

and take control of our world and ourselves, in expressive practices in which we represent ourselves and our ideas, and in critical practices in which we interpret what we read, view, play, then the final question is *how* does all this take place?

The tools which make our cultural, expressive, interpretive work possible are *semiotic* tools. Media literacy operates through systems of signification, or sign systems. This is, of course, indisputable – it is clear that the words of language, or the moving images of film, television and games, belong to different signifying systems. The problem arises when we try to find a coherent system which will somehow account for all the media we might want to include in our notion of media literacy.

To return again to the example at the beginning of this chapter, if we want a model of media literacy which can somehow account for how children engage with the Harry Potter story across book, game and film, we need something beyond language. The study of sign systems, as is well known, begins with (amongst others) the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1983), who forecast a general science of semiology, in which language would become merely one among many systems of signification. Over the twentieth century many attempts were made to apply the systems of de Saussure and others to a variety of media, especially to the moving image. Some of the more productive of these attempts are still widely used by media studies teachers today.

However, the picture is patchy, to say the least. We do not believe that a coherent idea of what media texts are or how they might be interpreted exists in the tradition of media education, although all influential models of media education require an understanding of the ‘languages’ of the media. In our view, these ‘languages’ consist at present of a confused bundle of interpretive practices, mostly from the structuralist semiotics of the sixties and seventies. In our view, a semiotic approach is needed, but it needs to be rationalised, to be extended to cater for new media and to be integrated with the emphasis of Cultural Studies on real audiences and the cultural contexts in which they live.

The approach represented in our model is derived from the tradition of *social semiotics* (Hodge and Kress, 1988; van Leeuwen, 2005). This tradition emerges partly from earlier semiotics, especially that of Barthes; but also from traditions of sociolinguistics, which have been particularly influential in the study of literacy, especially in Australia, New Zealand and the UK (Halliday, 1985). Social semiotics proposes a functional view of all acts of signification. All texts are seen to fulfil three social functions: *representational*, *interactive*, *organisational* (there are various versions of this triad; this is our own ‘remix’). These overarching functions mean, in the case of our concern with media, that all media texts will: *represent* the world in some way; *communicate* with audiences; and be *organised* in systematic ways as coherent and cohesive messages. The function of the last is primarily to serve the other two.

To return again to Harry Potter, then, to be fully literate across these three media, we might want this group of teenagers to:

- Understand how Harry *represents* certain ideas and values, through a system of narrative; and how narrative actions are differently possible in a book, a film and a computer game
- Engage with these media, and understand how they differently locate and address their audiences, what different possibilities there are for *interaction* with the world of the text, and how these kinds of engagement might work for other audiences
- Understand how these texts are *organised* to present coherent meanings, through different ‘grammatical’ systems, but with certain common principles.

However, the means by which these kinds of understanding can be explored is not necessarily (or only) through abstract analytical approaches. It might be, as we have argued above, by making their own text: writing the first chapter of a new Harry Potter novel; storyboarding or filming a scene from a new film; designing a new Harry Potter computer game.

This example also makes clear that our experience of media texts, whether ‘reading’ them or making them, is not by any means a simple, one-off event. Rather, it is a series of processes, which a social semiotic approach encourages us to unpack. This unpacking is valuable, not only for analytical reasons – it reveals buried layers of meaning and motivation behind the meaning – but also because of learning, which takes place, sometimes slowly and gradually, throughout these processes.

Our image of the semiotic process is borrowed again from a social semiotic model. Kress and van Leeuwen propose a scheme of four strata: *discourse, design, production, distribution*. To these, we have added interpretation, which forms the subject of another part of their book (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). These strata are offered by Kress and van Leeuwen as a model of *multimodal* communication: that is, they are intended to apply across all semiotic modes (such as visual design, language, music, the moving image). The development of multimodality theory is in one sense an attempt to realise Saussure’s original vision of a general science ‘which studies the role of signs as a part of social life’, and within which language would merely be one among many signifying systems (Saussure, 1983: 15). From another point of view, however, it is the logical counterpart of the ‘multiliteracies’ approach referred to above. If we are to be seen as ‘literate’ in different modes and media, then we need some kind of analytical approach to understand what kinds of text such literacies engage with.

We will explore how these strata might work in relation to children’s animation work in Chapter 3. For the moment, the following brief account is enough.

**Discourse:** Kress and van Leeuwen define discourse as ‘knowledge of (some aspect of) reality’. We can see discourses as related to genres, so that human knowledge of some aspect of reality, whether large and grand (such as warfare, or the Gothic imagination) or small and domestic (such as domestic chores or homework) will always be coded in particular communicative patterns. We see discourse, not just as the precursor to any act of meaning-making (though it is always that), but also as a pervasive medium which completely surrounds it; all aspects of the making of a text are discursively situated and informed.

**Design:** Design is the choice of mode. To tell a story you need to decide whether it will be told orally, or in writing, or perhaps as a visual narrative. Mode here means an individual signifying system. Multimodality theory, however, proposes that particular media forms integrate different modes: film integrates language, the moving image, music, visual design, dramatic action; comics integrate visual design and written language; and so on.

**Production:** Production involves the choice of medium. Modes are always realised through material media – once we have decided to tell a story in words we have to decide whose voice will tell it; if we write it, we have to decide on the material tools for the writing (fountain pen or word processor), the visual design of the writing, the paper on which it will be printed, and so on. These choices are not insignificant afterthoughts, but part of what makes the text mean what it does, and can affect the process of textual production significantly. The introduction of electronic media goes much further, not simply adding another set of material resources, but changing the nature of representation in profound ways, a question we will return to in Chapter 10.

**Distribution:** Texts can be distributed in many ways, sometimes through complex technologies, which can reproduce, disseminate, re-design, transform in many different ways. In the case of commercial media texts, how they are distributed forms part of the conceptual framework of media literacy, in which we might feel it important for students to understand how TV scheduling works, or how films are distributed to different kinds of cinema which affect how they are presented and viewed. In the case of students’ own media texts, a rather different set of questions apply: what kinds of distribution, publication, exhibition are possible? Again, the arrival of digital media opens up a wider range of possibilities here, in which teenagers might exhibit their work on *YouTube* or *MySpace*, on their school website or on portable formats and platforms.

### **Interpretation**

Interpretation is a *dialogic* process – it faces two ways. It is the process through which we understand the media texts we encounter, from an informal

chat with friends as we emerge from the cinema to more formal kinds of analytical work. However, it then faces in the other direction – towards our own production of texts, and our future audiences. As we will see in subsequent chapters, a student’s film, comic, computer game is always an act of interpretation as well as production; it grows out of interpretations of texts already encountered.

This, then, forms the backbone of our semiotic model of the processes through which media literacy is made possible.

One final – but important – observation remains. We are proposing this model for two rather different reasons. One reason is to *understand* how young people develop media literacy, just as literacy researchers and educators will use linguistic theory to analyse and explain what children are able to do with reading and writing. This purpose does not suppose that children necessarily acquire this analytical framework. If, in a study of print literacy, we discover that 11-year-olds use subordinate clauses successfully in their creative writing, this by no means requires us to argue that they know what a subordinate clause is, or that such knowledge would improve their ability to produce one. Indeed, a recent review suggests that there is no good evidence that grammar teaching improves the writing of young people (Andrews et al., 2004). However, this review does suggest that there might be other good reasons for teaching grammar, especially to provide a better understanding of how language works.

In much the same way, our argument here is that, when children arrive at school, they bring with them highly developed forms of media literacy already. They have extensive *implicit* knowledge of how media texts work; and the semiotic approach we describe here can be used to analyse *what they are already able to do*. As importantly, however, it can be used to outline what we want them to be able to do in addition. We might find, for instance, that they are instinctively able to *represent* characters and landscapes in their animation, but not so able to manage *interactive* aspects of their texts: to design their images in ways which indicate how the spectator is positioned (Chapter 3 will explore this area in more detail).

Our second reason for proposing a semiotic model, then, is that, in common with all specialist media educators, we also wish to help students to develop a conception of the semiotic workings of media texts. Such an understanding of the ‘languages, codes and conventions’ of the media is, indeed, a core component of the conceptual framework of media education. We will return in Chapter 5 to what we mean by a ‘concept’ in this respect, but we want to emphasise here that a concept, in our model, is also a semiotic entity: it is developed by using ‘semiotic tools’, as Vygotsky argued (1978), and it

cannot be separated from semiotic expression, whether in language or in some other mode. The degree of complexity, sophistication and technical detail we might aim for in students' understanding will be dependent on their age (we may feel this is more appropriate for older students), or on the particular critical focus of a specific course. However, it will also depend on the development in future years of suitable frameworks of the kind we describe here, adaptable for use with young people. We do not expect English teachers to be professional linguists, but rather to have some informed grasp of how language works, at a level appropriate for their students. The same applies with semiotics and media literacy. We have made a tentative start towards such practice at Parkside, but we will return to this question in subsequent chapters, as we consider how such practice might develop in the future.

#### CONCLUSION:TOWARDS THE SPECTATORIUM

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Our focus in this book is on media literacy, though also on media education. Buckingham (2003) sees the former as the product of the latter, and we agree with him. The examples we give in this book will give some idea of the processes of teaching and learning in which we hope to develop media literacy along the lines we have proposed in this chapter. Our aim has not been, of course, to produce a cast-iron model in which every gap is plugged, every question answered, every uncertainty resolved. Many of these questions will always remain open to different views, depending on the variety of purposes informing media education; and some of them are genuinely difficult questions to answer from a theoretical point of view. Our work will reflect a take on media literacy which we hope can be useful to others in our situation: working with primary and secondary school students, both in specialist media programmes and in other areas of the curriculum where media literacy has something to offer. A century ago classrooms were modelled on the mediaeval monastic scriptorium: a place of work where written language was the way to represent and understand the world. Half a century ago, tape-recorders and record-players introduced recorded archives of sound: folksong, popular music, the plays of Shakespeare, poets reading their own work, radio programmes in all genres. The scriptorium had given way in some respects to the auditorium (though the primacy of print literacy persisted). In the last decades of the twentieth century, visual media in the form of television, film, projected images, video and eventually digital audiovisual media grew in importance. The classroom was slowly becoming a spectatorium, where the persistent

reign of print was at least complemented by the still and moving image. These developments were largely confined to pedagogies of display: children listened and watched, rather than making. In this book, we focus especially on the meaning-making made possible by digital authoring technologies, the functions of the different forms of signification involved in such authoring, and the cultural value of what can be said that could not be said before in quite the same way.