



## **Guest Editorial**

# **Media Arts, Digital Culture and Education**

Andrew Burn, John Potter & Mark Reid, Guest editors, DARE Special issue

DARE (Digital Arts Research in Education) is a research centre set up to link with arts organisations in the context of digital media and education. Founder members are Prof. Andrew Burn (professor of English, drama and media education) and John Potter (senior lecturer in education and new media) at the Institute of Education (IOE), University of London, and Mark Reid from the British Film Institute. Alison Gazzard (lecturer in media arts at the IOE) is also a member of the DARE collaborative. The aim of DARE is to encourage research collaboration and conversation about the digital arts in education, formal and informal. Organisations involved include the BFI, the Tate, the British Library and others. Further information is available at [darecollaborative.net](http://darecollaborative.net)

Media education can be located between three distinct areas of school curricula: literacy education, arts education, and technology. These locations can be seen in practices across Europe, and indeed the world, the precise orientation varying from country to country and school to school. The rationale, formulation and practice to be found in different settings reflect both the tensions between these areas and the possible synergies. The emphasis in this special issue of *MERJ* is on the media arts: the orientation of media education to the arts curriculum. This a central concern for the DARE collaborative, represented in this special issue and this editorial. DARE is a cooperation between the Institute of Education and the British Film Institute. Its interests are broadly in arts in education; in the digital arts; and, for the three authors of this editorial, in the media arts in particular. We work with artists, cultural institutions, educators, young people and researchers to explore the role of the arts in society, education and popular culture; and to promote interdisciplinary research in these areas.

The relation between media education and the arts raises a number of questions: we will focus in this issue on four that we take to be central.

### **Rhetorics and the Poetics of Media Education**

How do media educators extend their well-established critical approach to media industries, texts and audience - what we might call the rhetorics of media literacy - to critical appreciation of the aesthetic functions of the media arts - what we can think of as





the poetics of media literacy?

The two are, or should be, two sides of the same coin. We cannot understand the poetics of a media text without exploring the forms of social and cultural value deployed by its makers and its audiences. By the same token, we cannot explore media design processes and how they construct social meanings without some grasp of aesthetic form and function; nor interrogate audience tastes, pleasures and interpretive strategies without considering their engagement with such forms and functions (Burn, 2009).

Media educators have typically been attentive to the rhetorics of the media: to the importance of conveying to learners a conceptual grasp of media industries, texts and audiences. This basic rhetorical framework, echoing Aristotle's ethos, logos and pathos, is the basis of the influential model proposed by David Buckingham (2003). This model, rooted as it is in the cultural studies tradition of thought, is not an abstract conceptual structure, but one grounded in a sensitivity to the lived culture of young people's media experience. It is also a model widely recognisable in school curricula and exam syllabuses, in the UK in particular. Arguably, however, media researchers and educators have been less attentive to the poetics of the media; or at least where they have, it has often been conceived in terms of socially-determined taste, in the manner of Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984). While this is valuable in moving beyond transcendental notion of the aesthetic, it begs some questions about the nature of design, affect, performance and textual composition, which practitioners - and learners - cannot avoid but may not be able to conceptualise easily. It is also a peculiarly circular argument: an engagement with the aesthetic domain through creative production, for example, becomes only another way of exemplifying a conceptual grasp of audience tastes and pleasures.

By contrast, the arts in education have been typically attentive to the aesthetic functions of the visual arts, music, theatre, dance and so on. It may be the case, however, that the category of the aesthetic here is traditionally constructed with too great an emphasis on formal proportion and innate cultural value rather than interrogated as a product of the politics of taste or culturally specific forms of cultural valuation. Related to this, it may also be the case that, as a general pattern, the arts in education - literature, music, painting, drama - are more inclined to conventionally-valued heritage culture than to popular culture. These kinds of polarity are necessary to address, though also more complex than they appear. There are no easy answers here, and teachers will often find their most productive work in helping students to negotiate boundaries of cultural taste and value. It is also the case that many arts educators are expanding the cultural range of their work and have been for many years, in spite of curricula which emphasise canonical choices. We can see, then, a disciplinary shift in art education towards a curriculum for





'visual culture', involving a move away from the institutions of fine art towards a more inclusive engagement with practices of visual representation (Duncum, 2001). This shift has been seen as a move away from conceptions of art education as elite, isolated from the culture of young people, and situated firmly within the project of modernity, towards a postmodern diversity of practices (Addison & Burgess, 2003). In this new dispensation, the old oppositions between word and image, artistic medium and technology, the sense of sight and the other senses addressed by contemporary multimodal texts are profoundly questioned. In respect of the relation between art and media education, this new diversity can also be seen as a productive rupture of disciplinary boundaries. New forms of collaboration with other education practices occupied with visual culture become not only possible, but desirable.

### **Creative Production**

What is the role of creative production work in media arts classrooms, workshops and clubs? How is critique balanced against design and production? How does creative production curate self-representations by young people in a recursive exploration of identity, place, society (Potter, 2012)? These are longstanding questions in media education, with a persistent history of a tension between theory and practice. There is general agreement that the two should be integrated: yet puzzling questions remain. Why exactly do we want students to be theorists? Why do we want them to make media? Is it so they can better understand the role of the media in their lives and societies (in which case why do they really need to make their own media)? Is it so they can better participate in the explosion of participatory media, online content creation, the digital maker culture (in which case why do they need theory)? Is it so they can get jobs in the media industries? These teleological imaginings of the kinds of citizen, worker, artist of the future are perhaps unavoidable rationales for curriculum design, at least for policy-makers. Nevertheless, they typically overlook the real reason why anyone writes a poem, makes a song, paints a picture, creates a film: its purpose in the moment, for the urgent communication of an idea or feeling, a compulsion to tell a story, a desire to play a role, imagine other identities, explore other places, times, societies, futures, pasts. At the heart of these questions lies the elusive nature of creativity and how we as educators conceive of it and provide for it. We know how contested it is: we have useful pointers in the work of Vygotsky to its transformative function in society, culture and the lives of groups and individuals (Vygotsky, 1931/1998; Banaji & Burn, 2007). Steve Connolly's article (page 32) in this issue employs Vygotsky and Heidegger to explore how creativity defined as craft and techne is developed by teenage film-makers in an English classroom, proposing a dialectic





relationship between familiar and unfamiliar texts, concepts and practices.

A further urgent question about creative work in the media arts challenges the demarcation of subject disciplines characteristic of academic institutions, from universities to examination boards, from curriculum policy-makers to school department. Our own experience of media production projects in schools suggest that the best way to promote the range of skills needed to make a class film, animation or videogame is to have visual artists, musicians, story-writers, dramatists and digital designers all working together. Such collaboration is typical of the video game or film studio, but rare in education, for obvious reasons. There is a good case, then, to see media arts work as multimodal; to see curriculum boundaries as porous; and to see pedagogic endeavour as interdisciplinary. In the context of universities, interdisciplinary work which recognises the convergence of new media and the arts is more possible. Martyn Thayne and Graham Cooper (page 46) make the case for just such a collaboration in this issue, in their article 'Collaborative Pedagogy and Digital Scholarship: A Case Study of "Media Culture 2020"', which presents the outcomes of an ambitious five-university project in the digital arts and leads us to question the roles of artist as teacher/teacher as artist.

### **Pedagogy and Digital Media Arts Projects: artist as teacher/teacher as artist**

What is the role of the teacher in media arts education? Music teachers are typically musicians; art teachers typically artists; drama teachers sometimes actors or directors. Yet English teachers are rarely poets or novelists; media teachers rarely film-makers, game designers or comic-strip artists. But in an arts-oriented model, the teacher may increasingly be a participant in creative work with students, a model for such work, and a practitioner in her own right. How, then, might this professional identity evolve? How might it relate to the role of media artists brought in to work with students?

To take on these questions is to consider how the roles of media practitioners, teachers, artists, students, parents and others are operating in digital media arts in education, within a rapidly changing cultural, pedagogical and technological context. This is a sea change in the way such arts projects operate, though one that does not, in our view, feature new technology as the sole driver or determinant of action. Whilst the dispositions and affiliations of participants in media arts projects have a location in cultural life which is undeniably mediated by ubiquitous digital technology, those involved retain powerful forms of agency and identity which are shaped by social factors beyond the setting as well as by the 'signature pedagogies' within it (Thomson, Hall et al, 2012). This is a complex set of negotiated practices which is far from the default instructive mode of teaching and learning, but which address knowledge alongside skills and dispositions.



Digital media production in education, in particular the use of devices which hold the promise of 'makeability' (Fursteneau & MacKenzie, 2009) with well-designed software and accessible and easy-to-use hardware, suggest changes to the nature of media arts projects, such as those reported on by Cannon, Bryer and Lindsay in this issue. Techno-evangelists and enthusiasts may argue that the devices of digital media production themselves democratise production, freeing it from professional or creative 'expertise' and conferring some kind of agency on the end-users. Certainly, from observing digital media arts projects at close hand in recent years (see projects at Darecollaborative, 2014) it is clear that the onscreen provisionality of the software encourages playful experimentation, whilst the visibility of authorial decision-making brings semiotic resources and practices within easy reach of the makers of films, animations and games. However, several issues emerge which suggest that the digital resources are only a part of a much more complex picture which includes connections to popular culture, sensitive pedagogy on the part of those working with children and young people and the free-flow of 'porous expertise' between the participants, artists and educators.

Firstly then, connections to wider popular culture, including canonical and other texts, inherent in such activity mean that the bar is set high for participants. Whilst they are often utterly absorbed and engaged in working in the milieu of culturally familiar texts and practices (as in Connolly's article in this issue), they retain an interest in their own making which sees it as both high in quality and 'authentic' in its connections to a range of resources and repertoires across the available cultural assets. This is described by Cannon, Bryer and Lindsay as a response to digital making of being able to 'see' aspects of production for what they are, a system of quoting and calling to mind of resources drawn from a wide range of references. The discussion here recalls in some ways the famous notion of production pushing back against consumption described by Buckingham (2003).

Secondly, beyond the use of various digital tools in production, digital media arts suggests the emergence of forms of pedagogy which are far more porous than in other iterations. Others have written about how the default pedagogy in education is challenged, supplemented and sidestepped in arts projects by the employment of 'signature pedagogies' employed by arts practitioners in the projects (Thomson, Hall et al, 2012). Typically in digital arts projects these include a range of shortcuts and signature skills with technologies which are employed and exchanged freely between participants and media arts practitioners. The social actors are also drawing on repertoires of knowledge from across the semi-permeable membrane between school and wider culture (Potter, 2011). These in turn are negotiated into forms of expertise which have been suggesting as being 'porous' in nature (McDougall & Potter, 2015). They exist in a de facto 'third space' of





education which retains a commitment to a 'sociocultural literacy' (Gutierrez, 2008), such as is often represented in media arts projects. Cannon, Bryer and Lindsay (page 16) look at this complex negotiation in the final third of their article in a fascinating discussion of the nature of 'permission' and 'disruption' which is embedded in digital arts making, as they focus on a particular set of editing decisions and the conversation with the researcher. Here the sensitive questioning during the interview allows for a deeper engagement with the participant view of media arts production than is sometimes the case in evaluations of such work. These thoughts chime with the wider discussions in various literature reviews in the last two years (Peppler, 2013; Sefton-Green, 2013) which focus on the nature of 'digital making' in a variety of educational settings. Peppler in particular looks at the concept of 'interest driven' arts practices and this is recalled in Cannon, Bryer and Lindsay's piece in the various conversations between participants and researchers and in the whole notion, expressed in the title of 'disruptive innovation'.

In the free flow of 'porous expertise' between teacher-practitioners engaged in digital media arts practices, we may see the role of teacher being redefined with a new 'signature pedagogy'. The report by Thomson, Hall *et al* (2012) was concerned with the role of artist-practitioners in projects in the traditional arts which saw the role of the teacher as something different, midway between upholder of default pedagogy and rule enforcer. The project reported in Cannon, Bryer and Lindsay's piece took place in a school in which an innovative head of English is fully aware of the ways in which the lines between director and enabler become blurred. In this context it seems that pedagogy is founded on a belief in agency and activity as well as an understanding of the wider lives of learners and of the media and cultural landscape. In a busy urban school this individual engages in flexible working practices which engage and involve learners and makes a point of building personal networks on social media and through TeachMeets which move across the boundaries between home and school and which sustain innovation in the context of a wider performative culture. With this in mind, it is interesting to note the part that various social media play in these settings as they enable communication between and beyond settings. A project blog, for example, employed in a digital arts project has a meta-narrative, a reflexive function which draws commentary on the practices involved between the various contributors, researchers, evaluators and participants into the same screen space. Such narrative work at its best simultaneously publicises and cements the sense of purpose and lived experience within projects (for further examples see the work of the Cinematheque project and Creative Campus at the BFI which has a commitment to such working methods in its projects, linked from DARE Collaborative, 2014). DARE researchers are interested in pursuing means of communication and reflection which have a life







during and beyond media arts projects and in encouraging the flow of porous expertise in such work.

### **Media Arts and the Digital**

We can approach the significance of the digital for media arts in a number of ways. Here we will briefly discuss three: code, software and multimodality.

The current explosion of interest in coding – in community arts projects, training schemes, code clubs, maker-fayres, and school computing curricula, amongst other contexts – represents a kind of revolt against the mere use of digital tools made by others: an attempt to get below the bonnet of digital artefacts fuelled by an assortment of motives: educational principles both progressive (for example Katie Salen's 'Quest to Learn' project) and regressive (policy rhetoric about programming in schools); hack and mod culture; the rise of digital arts, both born-digital and digitally-mediated, in the galleries, libraries and museums sector. This revolution, energetic though it may be, raises some questions for researchers and educators in the media arts. Does coding really offer a democratisation of digital culture, or will a specialist elite continue to dominate digital production? What, actually, is the nature of code – of binary code and of the dizzying variety of programming languages and scripting tools? How do we conceive of these in relation to the arts? As languages? Semiotic systems? Mathematics? Art forms with their own aesthetic functions and properties?

And what imperatives fuel this loose assortment of impulses in society? In the code-to-learn curriculum, is coding the new passport to successful employment? And if so, what other specialist knowledge and skills might be displaced to make way for it? It is already apparent that a danger of subject-silos in school curricula will confine coding in schools to its own epistemological space, or at best expand it into the STEM subjects; while the arts, including the media arts, remain disconnected. Our position as media arts educators should be to find theoretical and practical ways to overcome this fragmentation: to find productive purposes for coding in the media arts, and, with our colleagues in art, drama, music, literature, to grasp and develop the potential for computer science in this broad field of endeavour.

Meanwhile, the rise of software studies raises other questions. Lev Manovich poses a challenge for media and media arts educator in his latest book *Software Takes Command*. Part of his argument, continued from his earlier work, is that software unifies media into a single digital 'metamedium', with transferable common operations. Cut and paste, search and replace, scroll, are generic software functions that are used in webpage creation, word processing, video and audio editing, graphic design. But at the same time there are new





operations specific to individual modes: grids of pixel-based manipulation for 2D images, vectors for 3D, editable wave-forms for music. For media arts educators, digital video interfaces have created a new meta-language for students, which merges with the old terminology of film editing - timeline, dither dissolve, render – as well as terms which, both linguistically and iconographically, recall the older technologies – razor, fade to black, bin. Meanwhile, game design interfaces produce representations of the distinctive processes of game creation: 3-D world-building, rules, conditionality, quantifiable economies, game algorithms.

The implications for media arts educators, and for DARE's research, is that we should not only imagine (and practice) the digital as applied to old legacy media; but the new forms of art and culture made possible by software and hardware: film-making on mobiles and tablets can now be shot in portrait or landscape format – a major shift in the expressive possibilities of film; data can be transformed into different forms of representation – visualised in images or sounds; different modes can be transcoded – sounds into pictures, words into sound. What we think of as separate modes, never mind separate media, are no longer fixed and stable. Nevertheless, what Manovich identifies is essentially a paradox. On the one hand, software converge in their operations, and dance to the tune of a common underlying code; on the other hand, they attend in specialised ways to the digital incarnations of different expressive modes. And, of course, though binary code is at the base of all, the expression of specialised functions – the identification of colours in visual design or the algorithms of digital games – are distinct and adapted to purpose.

Equally important is Manovich's insistence on the cultural nature of new media: the case for the computer as 'cultural machine', both because it is culturally produced by humans in particular social and cultural contexts; and because it produces, or is used to produce, cultural artefacts. The arguments against technological determinism are well rehearsed; yet still conceptions of culture, cultural practice, cultural politics, cultural agency, cultural identity, can all too readily disappear in curricula built around the design technologies of the digital. This is true in school education; but also in Higher Education, where, in spite of greater freedom for interdisciplinary experiment and collaboration, the mindsets of specific disciplines persist, self-policing their boundaries. The article in this issue by Natalie Underberg-Goode and Jo Anne Adams (page 60), 'Multidisciplinary Exploration of Peruvian Culture Through Visual Design and Website Development', describes a welcome exception. It describes a project in which questions of cultural representation and identity are embedded in a design course, leading students to explore, interrogate and perform aspects of Peruvian culture through web and game design. Here, the range of technologies become secondary to their cultural purpose, and to the







affordances for social communication they offer.

Finally, we might approach the question of the digital and media arts through the principles of multimodality. It is relatively easy to think of films and games as multimodal – they involve image, dramatic action, language, music, sound and so on. Similarly, they embody generic principles which operate across modes: framing, both in time and space; ways of constructing their version of reality or authenticity (modality); systems of address with which to involve the spectator or player. However, the question of the digital nature of the media involved is more difficult. It raises the question, debated recently in a seminar at the London Knowledge Lab, of code as mode: whether digital code can be seen as an orchestrating mode which organises and produces these other more familiar semiotic forms. The curricular principles at stake here are again those of connected learning. Media educators cannot afford any longer to remain closed in a world of film, game, comic book and newspaper, a conceptual framework of institution, text, audience. These constructs need opening up to admit the concepts of the digital world: code, algorithm, the logic and properties of number. By the same token, educators in the world of ICT and school computing need to open up to the world of the arts and media, and their key concepts: narrative, representation, culture, curatorship.

### Conclusion

The convergence of media education and the digital arts, then, requires some conceptual shifts, as well as changes in practices and pedagogies. We have drawn attention to the need to connect the aesthetic concerns of the traditional arts with the rhetorical rigour of media education; and to relate both of these to conceptions of creative practice which propose imaginative effort in a social context. We have argued that the signature pedagogies of artists in educational settings need to be balanced and matched by another kind of signature pedagogy: the teacher-as-artist. And finally, we have emphasised the cultural functions of the digital, the double performance of software as medium-agnostic and medium-specific, and the multimodal orchestration performed by code as mode. The articles in this special issue of *MERJ*, then give some sense of how media educators are wrestling with these issues in different national contexts and educational settings; and how the most productive responses to the questions they pose involve a challenge to older certainties about media, art, creativity, and the once-familiar subject disciplines which address them.



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