

# Book and Resources Reviews

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## Laughey's Canon

Editor's note: In his provocative call in these pages for a 'Back to Basics' return to Media Studies 1.0, Dan Laughey proposes a canon for our discipline. Intrigued by this suggestion, we asked him to provide some texts he would include, and thus ascribe legitimation, in order for us to ask contemporary media educators to assess their value in and for their practice. This is, then, the first in a series of such reviews.

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## Review of *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* by Raymond Williams

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To see the true worth of this text in a modern context, media educators need to look beyond the main title to the subtitle: *Technology and Cultural Form*. This is less a book about the medium of television and more a book about the complex relationship between society and technology. This summer (2011), Blackberry Messenger became the latest technological scapegoat when pundits and politicians suggested it was responsible for the London riots. Other social media have been credited with similar socio-political powers with Facebook and Twitter revolutions in Iran and Egypt respectively. Whether for better or for worse, the dominant rhetoric is that technology has the power to shape our lives. The arguments put forward in *Television* might, to my students at least, seem tired when applied to TV but they are given a new lease of life when applied to current debates about the effects and uses of the internet and social media.

First published in 1974, Williams' book discredits notions of determined technology and technological determinism and urges the reader to take a more nuanced and informed opinion of the interplay between the human and the machine. This is a feat that, he admits, will require, 'prolonged and cooperative intellectual effort'. It's disappointing, then, that almost 30 years on, the explosion in popularity of social networking has cultural critics scurrying into opposing determined/determinism corners. The intellectual effort required to fully understand social impact and influence is still lacking – which is why we need this text.

What *Television* offers us that current writings about the internet can't, is a critical distance on the effects and uses of a near-universal populist media. Williams' historical exploration of the 'complex interaction between new needs and new developments' takes into account the social, commercial, scientific and psychological. The development of communications technologies is, he suggests, the result of a plethora of mini-discoveries and inventions in numerous scientific fields. Simultaneously, commerce, industry and

mobility evolve in response to and despite these developments, resulting in the birth of new popular technologies. The evolution of technologies is so gradual that they seem to be 'inevitable' results rather than deliberate decisions.

Williams' writings are particularly pertinent when applied to current media debates around consumers as producers, such as WeMedia and Media Studies 2.0. He explores the factors – 'the distribution of power or of capital, social and physical inheritance, relations of scale and size between groups' – that influence how and what we consume. He envisages an increasingly globalised media where technological development is in the hands of big corporations but he also recognises the power of universal media such as television and pirate radio to give a voice to the underdog. In his final chapter he predicts increased interactivity, on-demand broadcasting, video conferencing, the proliferation of videotape equipment (for the very well-off) and community television channels. Not bad for a man who would never send so much as a text message in his lifetime.

So long as media learners and educators continue to question how humans and machines interact, this book will remain a key text.

Reviewer – Claire Pollard, Head of Media Studies, Sir John Cass Redcoat School, Stepney, London

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### ***Young People, Popular Culture and Education* by Chris Richards (2011, London: Continuum)**

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The connections between media education, Education Studies, Cultural Studies and Citizenship are clear and abundant, but rarely articulated coherently in journals, books or at conferences. This journal and the Media Education Summit are two spaces for such dialogue but elsewhere (BESA, BERA, MECCSA), Media / Cultural Studies and Education Studies and research struggle to find common ground to transgress, in Bernstein's terms, 'insulation'. Chris Richards is ideally placed to present such a dialogue. In *Young People, Popular Culture and Education* he locates debates around youth, media and learning firmly in the tradition of Cultural Studies and uses such a framing to provide a textbook, with reflection points and a companion website (for Education Studies undergraduates primarily), that will be of great value for modules related to education, media and youth / childhood.

The book is divided into two parts. Firstly, a historical account of research and enquiry into culture, youth and education takes us through the premises of Cultural Studies, the

meeting points of Education Studies, Cultural Studies and Women's Studies and current / new directions in youth research. Then the book develops into five 'case studies' before a concluding chapter looks at future research into youth, politics, gender and citizenship in the obligatory 'new media' context. In a good way, this is partly an autobiographical collection of Richards' work to date; he has been an English and Media teacher in secondary and FE, taught and researched at the Institute of Education and more recently has been a full-time ethnographer.

A whole module / course of study could very well be mapped out against the structure of the book with students looking at research from the London Knowledge Lab, media coverage of UK riots and race / agency (although more recent events would require some updating of this material by students, not only at the level of 'case study' – i.e. this year's riots – but also how self-presentation in new media spaces might make a difference to how 'the media' represent agency), and children and television. I was fascinated by Richards' research into how 'real' play and mediation interweave in playgrounds, which he presented at the Media Literacy Conference in London in 2010. There is only limited coverage of that here, either because the book focuses on older children / young people, or perhaps more simply because he wrote this before that research but it's a great shame more of it couldn't have been included because it would serve to update and to some extent 'reframe' the whole chapter. It also threatens to unravel some confusion over the scope of the book in terms of what is meant by 'youth' and more broadly by 'childhood' as the use of 'youth' in the title might limit the readership unnecessarily in this respect.

In the sections on young adult readers and popular music, the case studies (Francesca Lia Block; Muslim hip hop and *Doing It*) are contextualised clearly in the fields of reference for the book as a whole – identity, othering, 'lived' culture and notions of textual power. As someone who has instinctively taken a Cultural Studies approach to Education Studies, research and teacher training, I felt a great affinity to these ethnographies and they are certainly presented in the appropriate mode of address for the student readership, which is a challenge Richards has met with conviction.

Sadly, the weakest area is of particular interest to readers of *MERJ*. The material on media education, not only in the chapter devoted to it but throughout the book as a whole, is in need of an update. Buckingham's 2003 text, *Media Education* (Cambridge: Polity) is taken as a contemporary upgrade of Masterman / Lusted. However, in the nine years since publication, a great deal has happened which is ignored here – the intersection of research into literacy with media education in the form of the much-contested 'Media Literacy', the role of OFCOM in (partly) reframing media education along protectionist lines and the attempts by awarding bodies to oblige greater use of 'out of school' creative

work in Media Studies (an area discussed in these pages by Pete Fraser). The majority of this chapter concerns the 1980s and it is a rich and fascinating account of praxis. But the relationship between looking back and forward to the present / future is loosely stated and the chapter ends with brief references to the work of the Media Education Foundation in Massachusetts and recent work on creativity, technology and youth. Richards does return to this ground in the final chapter; Buckingham's *Beyond Technology* (2007) is cited with a pithy summary of precisely the debate that provides the theme for this issue of MERJ. But, again, these conclusions appear rather rushed and don't bring together the themes of the preceding chapters with sufficient clarity. There is a bit of a 'cop out' in the disclaimer that this can only be a 'tentative outline' and the result is a book that is, in the main, a historical overview of these inter-related fields. The attempt to look ahead to how these areas of enquiry might develop in practice in the 'online age' is given insufficient weight and gives the impression of an afterthought.

However, as such a historical account, *Young People, Popular Culture and Education* is excellent, being research-informed, inclusive in its strategy and full of examples that resist assumptions and generalisation. It will add great value as an essential text for all students, 'trainees' and professionals engaged in the study of education in its mediated 'lifeworld' contexts. Taken as a starting point for more contemporary (and future) explorations on the part of our students, this is a rich resource.

Reviewer – Julian McDougall, Centre for Developmental and Applied Research in Education,  
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