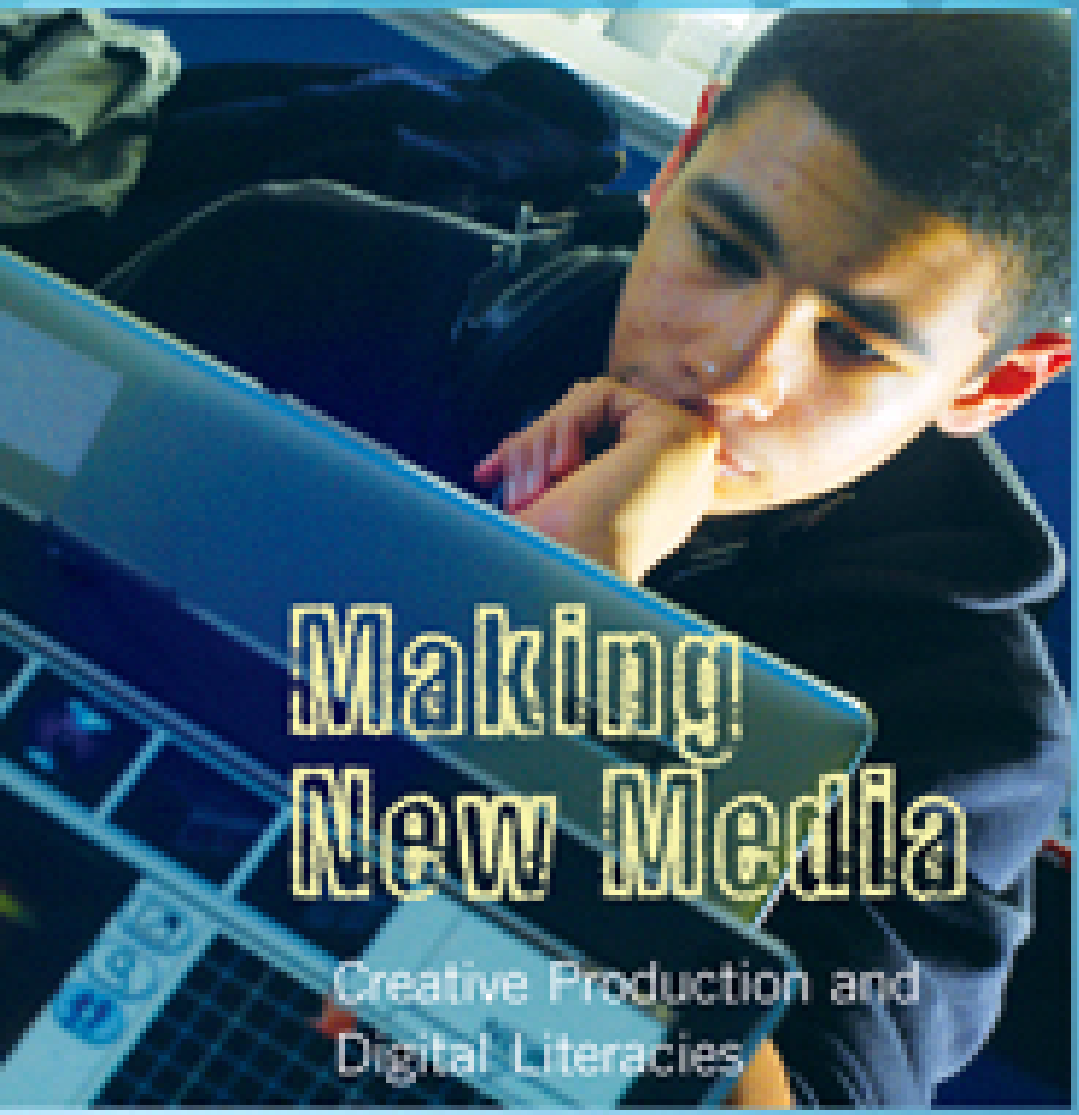

Making New Media

Creative Production and Digital Literacies

Andrew Burn

CHAPTER ONE

Making New Media: Culture, Semiotics, Digital Lit/*O*racy

> And hath he skill to make so excellent?
>
> —Edmund Spenser, *The Shepherd's Calendar*

This book is about two things: Making and New Media. To 'make', in Middle English and Middle Scots, was a synonym for writing poetry, itself a derivation of the Greek verb *poieo*, 'to make'. This etymology is significant for the collection of essays in this book. For one thing, it suggests the making of expressive or artistic pieces of work; and all of the practice described here is about learners and teachers making media which can be loosely described in this way. It is about the relationship between media production and the arts in education, as well as about kinds of literacy. It is also about creativity, and what we might mean by that word, as teachers and researchers. For another thing, it suggests expressivity as practical, material construction, which will also be a theme of this book.

Making is primarily about *representation*: the combination of ideas that represent the world in some way and the material substances—of language, image, music, dramatic gesture—which make it possible. For Aristotle, who used the word mimesis, or imitation, this was cultural both in the sense that it was an imitation of nature made by human art, and in the sense that it took place within the 'cultural' space of poetry. But it was also cultural in a material sense, in its use of the physical instruments of language and music to create specific aesthetic effects. However, to see representation only as imitation is to depoliticise it.

Aristotle's conception of how language might intervene in, indeed perform, the work of politics belongs not to his *Poetics*, but to his *Rhetoric*. For modern theorists of literacy, representation and rhetoric belong together. Bill Green argued as long ago as 1995 that English teachers needed to seek a critical-postmodernist pedagogy 'within which notions of popular culture, textuality, rhetoric and the politics and pleasures of representation become the primary focus of attention in both "creative" and "critical" terms.' (Green, 1995: 400).

Re-reading these words now, I am struck by their ambitious synthesis of ideas. As well as the notion of rhetoric, which runs more strongly through the Australian history of literacy studies than the British one, this vision of a future pedagogy includes elements of current models of media literacy, the critical and the creative, to which I will return. It also embraces the idea of textuality, which implies both objects of study in the media and English curricula, and the textual structures which we have become used to thinking of in terms of different modes and media (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2000), and in relation to multiple forms of literacy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). It also situates these practices firmly in a political context; but at the same time invokes the elusive idea of pleasure, to which, again, I will return.

Green's yoking together of the concepts of rhetoric, textuality and popular culture is reminiscent of a proposal made by Kress and van Leeuwen (1992) in a paper critiquing the work of the later Barthes. In it, they make the claim that social semiotics is 'the theoretical, analytical and descriptive branch of cultural studies'.

For those who, like me, are schooled in the tradition of British Cultural Studies, this claim indicates a desire to operate with the theories of culture emanating originally from the work of pioneers such as Raymond Williams (1961), the subsequent work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and the more recent developments in this tradition which seek to interpret the phenomena of popular culture, and especially diverse, fragmented, fluid patterns of youth culture. Kress and van Leeuwen's proposal relates this tradition to a theory of signification rooted in the cultural and social function of the text, derived from sociolinguistics, and Halliday in particular (1985). As a necessary corollary of this, it connects texts with the social interests of their related signmakers: those who make them, and those who use, read, view or play them. In the context of education, it offers a theory of signification ready for synthesis with the work of scholars of children's media cultures, such as Buckingham, who provides influential research in how children engage with media texts (e.g., 1996), as well as proposals for how the pedagogies of media education might be influenced by Cultural Studies (2003).

CULTURAL STUDIES: BACK TO BROADER DEFINITIONS OF CULTURE

This has always seemed to me a potentially valuable connection to make. Cultural Studies has been an immensely invigorating development in media research, radically shifting the emphasis from textual structures to lived cultures, from ideal spectators to real audiences, from abstract textual politics to situated cultural politics. However, in developing its methodological apparatus from forms of ethnographic investigation, discourse analysis, and social theory, it gradually became apparent that it never really developed a new way to think about signification and text. When the scholars of Cultural Studies reached for techniques of textual analysis, they reached back in time, or borrowed, as Hebdige and Fiske did from French semiotics in their respective analyses of punk and Madonna (Hebdige, 1979; Fiske, 1989).

So the combination with a new semiotics proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen, which offered to recover some of the clarity of structuralist semiotics, while sustaining the benefits of a post-structuralist emphasis on the fluidity and contingency of meaning, looked appealing, to say the least.

However, to date there has been little in the way of worked-through practical realisations of this promising combination of theoretical and methodological approaches. Green's argument is the best, most inclusive, most imaginative one I know for why the connection urgently needs to be made. His reference to popular culture, and to the pleasures and politics of representation, strongly suggests Cultural Studies scholarship which has productively informed both the sociology of education, extending our understanding of youth subculture (Willis, 1977; 1990); and the development of models of media education in the UK which attended more positively and specifically to the popular cultural experience students bring into school (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Marsh & Millard, 2000).

Popular culture is a recurrent theme of the essays in this book, written for journals over the last decade, and charting practices, theories and methodologies in my work as a school teacher and then as an academic researcher in the general field of literacy, and the more specific field of media education. Popular culture is frequently referred to, and the media educator's mantra that media studies and media education are one of the few areas of the curriculum that take popular culture seriously is often acknowledged. One of the probable benefits of postmodernist theory, however, is the hypothesis of a collapse of the formerly well-policed boundary between popular and élite cultures, suggesting that those media texts which exist in borderline spaces may be the most productive ones to use with

young people, to unsettle and explore questions of taste and cultural value. Chapter 2 provides an example, discussing 13-year-olds' work on Neil Jordan's film *The Company of Wolves*, in one sense a self-consciously art-house fantasy, in another a skilled deployer of the visual tropes of popular werewolf movies. Similarly, Chapter 3 explores teenage reverse-engineering of *Psycho*: low-budget popular horror, later elevated to auteurist masterpiece. Other chapters explore how children's animations infuse traditional folktales with the imagery of popular TV cartoons (chapter 4); how children's computer game designs can make popular sci-fi texts but also remediate epic classical narratives (chapter 7); how machinima can locate itself in different aesthetic traditions, from First Person Shooters to European arthouse animation (chapter 8).

The postmodernist explanation is perhaps too glib, however. Another way to think about different kinds of culture, more closely related to the history of Cultural Studies, and to the interdisciplinary landscape of media and literacy teachers, is to return to one of the founding texts of British Cultural Studies, Raymond Williams' *The Long Revolution* (1961). For Cultural Studies at its inception, this was perhaps the most influential manifesto of the importance and value of popular culture, rooted in Williams' level of 'lived culture', corresponding to his '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.' (1961: 41).

Media educators influenced by Cultural Studies have been at pains to point out the dangers of homogenising this 'common culture', the need to recognise the proliferation of tastes displayed by young people; while the sociology of youth culture has increasingly recognised the fragmentation of young people's and children's cultural affiliations into myriad forms and lifestyles, shaping and shaped by forces both global and local (e.g., Bennett, 2000; McRobbie, 1991; Willett, 2006).

However, what the field of Cultural Studies has always been reluctant to do is to return to Williams' triple definition of culture, and the three corresponding levels of culture he identified. Along with the social definition, he identified an 'ideal' definition; and a 'documentary' definition. These correspond to the levels of culture he described as 'the selective tradition', and the 'documentary record'.

These—understandably overlooked by Cultural Studies in its traditional concerns with the contemporary moment and the emancipatory politics of class-based accounts of culture—seem to me to be worth returning to.

The value of Williams' idea of the selective tradition may now be threefold. Firstly, it offers a way out of the binary opposition of élite-popular by proposing a historical process of cultural distinction. To be sure, this process may still reaffirm

the dominant tastes and values of an élite class, but if the postmodernist hypothesis has any value, something more diverse, if not an actual inversion of the old hierarchies, may be the consequence. Secondly, the selective tradition provides for the possibility of today's item of popular culture becoming tomorrow's item of undisputed cultural value. This kind of pattern is common in the history of popular media—yesterday's comic-strip culture becomes the stuff of today's collectors' fairs; the computer games of thirty years ago become curated in élite cultural institutions[1]; 50s 'B' movies are affectionately and reverently showcased by the British Film Institute. Thirdly, the selective tradition itself as a process suggests the contestation and negotiation of cultural value, which is surely exactly the kind of process we want students to uncover, critically observe, and learn how to participate in.

As for Williams' idea of culture as a documentary record, this again offers a historicised view of culture which is of value to our students of literature and media. One argument here is to do with critical distance. All media teachers know the difficulties of making music videos with students—how absorbed they become in the delighted affirmation of their own musical tastes, how blind to the possible merits of other people's. One way out of this is to somehow negotiate a truce, a listening space for the discussion of different genres and styles. Another, proposed by the influential English media teacher Pete Fraser and his colleague, Barney Oram (2003), is to give students old singles from the 60s and 70s, creating instant critical distance. A further move would be the study of the cultural moment represented by this 'old' music: a study, in other words, of its documentary cultural significance. Although Williams' notion of the cultural record was illustrated by vast historical distance (the documentary evidence of classical civilisation), we may consider much shorter time frames. Popular cultural forms mutate dramatically over a few decades—but the lifestyles and tastes they record still live in the memories of the parents and grandparents whom our students can profitably interview.

The return to Williams' tripartite model, then, seems to offer several clear benefits for teachers of literacy and media. Chiefly, it offers a historical perspective which gives us much-needed relief in several tricky areas. Rather than simply relativising cultural value, or reducing it purely to contemporary tastes, it offers a way to consider how cultural value accretes over time, making visible the operations of social power at work in this process. Rather than endlessly celebrating or bemoaning the present moment, the historical view, whether long or short, gives us and our students critical purchase and inter-generational understanding. Rather than lampooning élite culture at one moment, and lurching into a postmodern clinch with it the next, we can see how the élite and popular ends of the spectrum develop together, feed from each other, caricature each other, morph into each