

What does 'reading' mean in media studies?

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When confronted by a class who have no experience of media studies, I suspect most of us start by teaching students how to read images. After all, it's a fair assumption that most of them can read words.

Indeed, many may have experience of analysing images through their study of National Curriculum English (though the delivery of this part of the curriculum varies greatly). Most students soon get to grip with the denotation-connotation pattern of analysis and begin to become, to a degree, autonomous readers of the media. While the reading of words isn't forgotten – captions, newspaper reports and magazine articles – how many media studies students will read fiction prose or poetry as part of their course?

It's hardly surprising that the answer to the above question is 'bog all'. None of the specifications require books to be read and media departments invariably don't have the financial clout to buy class sets of books. Most media textbooks ignore novels too; a few deal with publishing as an industry. The British Film Institute has a remit to promote the 'moving image' and so not only won't commission media studies texts based upon literature; they also eschew music.

The exam boards do not encourage students to deal with literature; a few years ago one of my students wanted to write the opening of a novel in Gothic style as her production but this was disallowed. No doubt, if she had wanted to create the opening of a film in such a style then this would have been fine. The old NEAB A level syllabus required students, following the 'study in depth' genre, to study 'differences within a genre between different media', making the study of literature crucial for many genres. Genre is an ideal concept to examine literature (after all, the concept developed from literature study) and the study of genres such as science fiction demands that students recognise conventions developed first in literary fiction. However in the six

years of the syllabus's existence a question was never posed on that bullet point.

Can this absence of literature in the media studies curriculum be due to the existence of English departments? The study of English literature has become proscribed in recent years with the return of book lists, gone is the enlightened AEB A Level syllabus which allowed students to study popular literature and write creatively as part of their coursework. The approach at pre-19 level is resolutely Leavisite.

It is not accurate to think that there is no point in studying books in media studies because the English department does it: they do it differently. When media studies, particularly Film Education, material approaches literature it invariably focuses on adaptations. This is often a sterile approach (Which is better? 'Well, the film cuts so much of the book that...'). It is far better to treat adaptations as separate entities, and consider how successful the text is in its own terms. It can be useful to study adaptations as a way of isolating a medium's essential formal elements: for example, the novel is ideal for 'interiority' whilst film excels at spectacle. When introducing storyboarding I have asked students to suggest how to film the opening of *Double Indemnity* by James M. Cain. We've then compared their efforts with the movie, not in a 'Billy Wilder did it right' fashion, but to see the potential for different versions and how meaning is altered in adaptation.

There seems to be a perpetual moral panic that youngsters don't read any more. A straw poll conducted with the librarian at my school suggests that the 'Point Horror' brand is in decline, as is Terry Pratchett. Jacqueline Wilson is big with KS3 females whilst the males prefer non-fiction, particularly if it's packaged as 'gross out', such as the 'orrible History' series. TV and cinema tie-ins remain popular. No doubt J.K. Rowling is raking in the benefits of the Harry Potter movie as you read this. By choosing books popular with students we can guarantee a degree of familiarity and likely enthusiasm;

however, the fact remains that many students won't read for pleasure and getting them to access the chosen book will be difficult.

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I have heard of a few secondary schools that teach GCSE Media Studies with English (and English Literature). Although GCSE English requires a media assignment I cannot imagine there's enough time to deliver both – or even three – specifications properly (if you're doing this please let itp know how it works). Ideally, English departments should be subsumed under the media department: literature (used in its widest sense to include 'pulp' fiction) is, after all, only a medium. However, for this to happen we would need to take control of QCA (and then the Government – hey, not a bad idea). This is not going to happen.

If media studies is truly going to be a study of all media then we must study literature. This is easiest to do with short stories (we could never read a novel in class) and genre is an obvious starting point for analysing any mainstream text. The analysis of book covers is relatively easy to resource and this can lead us into a consideration of marketing. This feeds back into genre when considering how bookshops shelve their books under categories (failing a visit to the bookshop, a virtual trip to Amazon.co.uk – or elsewhere – will suffice). Behind these categories there is likely to be an assumption about audience: all SF/fantasy fans can get their anoraks out and we can consider the psychosis behind those of us who love the 'true crime' series.

However, I think that until the requirement to study literature (and by that I mean books) is enshrined in specifications it will remain on the edges and so in the ghetto.

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