

“Like you have a bubble inside of you that just wants to pop”: Popular culture, pleasure and the English classroom

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ABSTRACT: This article explores issues connected to popular culture and the English classroom, asking how students’ social and critical responses can be mobilised as productive literacy practices. With changing conceptualisations of literacy, popular texts are increasingly recognised as powerful resources through which varieties of forms of communicative competence are learned. Through students’ journals and interviews, I look closely at the connections between issues of identity and literacy and suggest ways that these could offer forms of pleasurable textual engagement, as well as dimensions of critical and reflective practice in the classroom.

KEYWORDS: popular culture, literacy, teenage culture, English classroom.

INTRODUCTION

First, a test:

1. What is the name of the celebrity who is currently on *Neighbours* and has a chart hit?
2. Who are the three hosts on Nova’s breakfast program?
3. What is Rachel’s baby’s name?
4. Name the stars of *Charmed*.
5. Who is the enemy of Spiderman?
6. Name Raymond’s brother.
7. Who mostly narrates *Secret Life of Us*?
8. Is *Star Wars* an XBOX or PS2 game?
9. Who is Ethan Crane’s father?
10. How many hairs does Homer have on top of his head?

(answers at the end)

Chances are, if you are past your mid-twenties and tried this test, you rated poorly. The knowledge that forms part of the cultural world assumed by this test is most likely distant from your cultural knowledge, and certainly a long way from any formal notion of “cultural literacy”. E. D. Hirsch’s classic text *Cultural Literacy: What every American needs to know* (1987) features an appendix which lists more than four and a half thousand specific names and things with which Americans should be conversant. That so many people are not so conversant suggests to Hirsch that schools have failed to fulfil their “fundamental acculturative responsibility”.

Have we? Hirsch’s definitive list of “vital” understandings begs the question of exactly whose literacy and whose culture count here. Not those who populate our classrooms, I suggest. Yet the curriculum largely operates on some explicit or implicit idea of “important things to know”, knowledge which ignores teenage popular culture. Popular texts are often dismissed, seen as involving no critical dimensions and therefore demanding none from their readers. Popular culture is commonly regarded as transient, insubstantial and occupying enough time in

teenagers’ lives outside school to warrant space in a crowded school curriculum. Why should we care which female the Bachelor will choose? Whose baby Rachel had on *Friends*? What appeal do daytime soaps such as *Passions* hold for 17 year old females? English teachers may shrink from the thought of introducing such texts to their classrooms – places for stretching the young minds, for opening them up to “the boundless uplands of art for their field of growth” (Scott, 1975, p. 55). So why pop culture? Perhaps some exploration of the historical context might be a useful entry point to the debate.

THE CONTEXT

Many of us born before the 1970s emerged as students and teachers from traditional print text backgrounds. Such a background emphasised a “heritage aesthetic” (Burn, 2000, p. 28) and positioned English as an intellectual and moral corrective to “debasing” forces such as popular culture. English as a form of “high culture” for cultivating the mind grew, late in the nineteenth century, from Matthew Arnold’s sense of “the best that has been thought and said”. Remnants of Arnoldian and Leavisite views can still be traced in current curriculum documents and classroom text choices. They also remain embedded in personal and professional attitudes.

Teachers who have emerged from this educational framework do not feel readily comfortable with the role of the popular in the English classroom. They need to be convinced of both the theoretical foundations as well as the classroom potential of incorporating popular texts. Much of the work I have done in relation to popular culture has been a systematic attempt to rebuild many of the assumptions of my own English trajectory, and I digress for a moment into some personal history.

The transition from the canon towards the popular began for me quite markedly a decade ago when I was discussing the narrative playfulness of John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* with a senior class. Struggling late in the teaching day to engage the students with the structural form, I was interrupted by one of the boys asking whether I had seen Arnold Schwarzenegger’s film of the moment, *Total Recall*. Somewhat exasperated, I asked him why he would refer to that film during this discussion. “Because”, he replied, “it’s what you’re talking about. You keep getting different versions of what’s happening so you don’t know what to believe in the end.”

Taken back by both the simplicity and sophistication of his response, I recognised the potential of popular texts to promote further thinking about texts and the ways they work. If I had begun with the narrative ideas in *Total Recall*, I may have enjoyed a far livelier class as well as finding useful bridges between his (and all his friends’) cultural world and mine. The difficulty was that I had dismissed his texts as being too male, too one-dimensional, too violent, to see the capacity for extending the viewer’s pleasure, as well as opportunities for critical thinking. I was locked into my own textual perspectives – the textual views I had always believed represented an intellectually (and thus educationally) “improving” path to understanding. Simultaneously, I indulged in my own “guilty” television and magazine pleasures, yet it would not have occurred to me to admit my popular tastes to my friends, never mind teaching such material as text.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, *The Simpsons*, reality television and so on are now the subjects of academic discourse. So what has changed? Literacy and cultural theories for a start, but before they made sense, I had to work further with my student’s comment. It set in train hours of listening to teenage talk, talk which occurred among themselves outside the class about texts they loved. To situate the talk (and the texts) in some kind of literate context, I needed to find out more about my students’ culture and how their talk inflected the relationships which involved them, their peers and their worlds. I began to see their talk through bifocussed lenses: the English teacher encouraging the students to extend their perceptions and the participant observer trying to “make the familiar strange” and see these teenagers through fresh eyes. What happened subsequently challenged all the familiar reference points of my prior education, transforming my approach to text and, indeed, my fundamental conceptualisations of English.

YOUTH CULTURE

The first realisation which struck me as important was that it’s not the texts themselves which are important; it’s what the teenagers *do* with the texts. The texts themselves are what they build their shared meanings – their culture – around. The teenagers I listened to most were four Year 10 students, familiar as peers but not close friends. Brought together for my research, they spent some time jostling for group positions relative to each other. One such negotiation occurred around a centrally-important cultural text – clothes. Here Hsiu discusses with the cool member of the group, Richard, the past embarrassments of “being” a homey and wearing big street pants:

Hsiu: I went through the biggest homey stage. I had 26 Red homey pants. I am so ashamed.

Richard: I have Mossimos ... 26?

Hsiu: 26 Red homey pants

Richard: Why?

Nicole: It’s a brand.

Hsiu: The brand 26 Red - I had black 26 Red homey pants okay?

Richard: I thought you said you had *twenty-six* red homey pants ... I’ve got dark blue Mossimos that I could fit two of you in.

There are several interesting points to note in this exchange. Here, Richard and Hsiu, who have known each other for years but are not close friends, attempt to place each other in the cultural hierarchy through reference to significant brand names. The problem is the semantic confusion over brand of pants versus number. However, Richard glides over the miscommunication and re-establishes parity by confessing to his own past fashion choices. The speakers have, after a shaky start, established a mutual connection and proceed with their relationship in that knowledge.

The processes of choosing what to wear and say are all part of what I refer to as the *literacies* of popular culture: Hsiu, from a fairly traditional Chinese home, is representing her identity here not as third Chinese daughter but as trendy street-wise Australian teenager. Both students overtly disclaim their former fashion gaffes, locating themselves as older and wiser (and more fashionable) now. Hsiu labels herself in writing as “shoe” (small ‘s’), choosing a homonym to extend her bicultural,

funky identity. The teenagers work to demonstrate their awareness of social difference, tacit rules and the explicit practices associated with social networks, or Gee’s (1987) “Discourses”. They need to utilise the range of signs and symbols available to negotiate competing influences and conflicting perceptions, establishing the kind of identities they desire in a given situation. Margaret Finders (1997), who has looked at the ways that adolescent girls established group identities via the “literate underlife” of their school lives, describes this kind of literacy as the process of moving from one language, or image frame to another. Further, as Yagelski (2000, p. 7) claims, the effort to construct a sense of self within the ever-moving image frames, or discourses, is always local. The point to reinforce is that teenagers are engaging in dynamic and often creative processes, choosing from what is available in shaping their sense of who they are. They are turning the text to their own interests.

THE PLEASURE OF THE TEXT

The texts of popular culture are popular because they provide a significant number of readers with pleasure. Yet this is perhaps another reason that English teachers are distrustful of the popular. Historically, pleasure has not been associated with “real” learning; in fact, we tend to oppose pleasure with deeper understanding. However, in terms of enjoying the popular, pleasure might take the form of trying out new identities (as did Hsiu and her “homey” pants), rehearsing adult or even antisocial feelings through “older” texts (witness the success of Virginia Andrews novels), or imagining oneself in an idealised future. In her reading journal, Hsiu here elaborates her response to *Jerry McGuire*:

I ♥ed [*Jerry McGuire*]. It was such a beautiful movie. The acting in it was superb! The characters were really defined and ♥able. It was one of those movies that makes you feel really happy, like you have a bubble inside of you that just wants to pop and is getting bigger and bigger. It put a smile on my face that I couldn’t get rid of. It wasn’t just the storyline that was interesting, it was the simplicity of the romance. Also it was kind of quirky which I liked a lot. It wasn’t all straight forward. It isn’t the usual romance movie, it had style to it. It’s a very memorable film. I could watch it over and over again.

She details the film’s virtues for her, recognising it as “an ideal romance” including “things that I wished I had” (47). The agreeable responses here are multi-layered. Hsiu’s expanding bubble resonates with Barthes’ (1972) concept of *jouissance*, experienced as an invasion of joy and, for a while, willing loss of self-control. On the other hand, she can additionally construct the feeling as knowing wish/fulfillment, as well as being able to identify the appealing textual features. Hsiu desires this sort of viewing experience, yet she can observe clearly how it is acting on her and describe her responses.

Such pleasures can be extended through the use of repetition, with students replaying some of their favourite sitcoms (*Friends*, *Seinfeld*) multiple times. Richard is able to break down the value of the process in ways that suggest teenage viewing is far from mindless, or even passive, as claimed by many folk theorists of the media:

Julie: I want to isolate some of the reasons you watch things over and over again.
Hsiu: I like the way they make me feel ...

Richard: And when you are watching something over and over again, you watch it for the first time you have to concentrate on what is happening. You have to think what is going to happen and where is the plot. Go into how is it developing, what are all the characters going to be thinking. But when you know what is happening it is a lot less stressful and you can just relax and watch the movie and take it in and just think of it on a slightly more relaxed level.

Richard may be more verbally analytical than many Year 10 students, but my survey of a cross-section of Year 10s from various schools suggests that students continually make judgements and discriminations over their preferred texts. The teenagers were found to regularly differentiate meanings, adopt certain behaviours and practices, reject and discard others and try out unfamiliar identities, affirming aspects of those they already know.

Anne Haas Dyson (1997) suggests through her research that these processes are being taken up even by very young children in creative ways. Dyson examined the implications of the uses of popular media figures for children’s early writing development. She noted the powerful ways that Prep children transformed popular forms (cartoon figures, television super and sporting heroes) into their classroom and playground lives. Using superheroes to negotiate their social positions in the class, the children effectively reframed their knowledge and employed popular culture as a literacy tool. This involved not merely reproducing, but appropriating the meanings of commercial culture in new ways. In this creative process, meanings are “selected, reselected, highlighted, and recomposed to make statements about individuals’ views of themselves and their social worlds” (Dyson, 1997, p. 16).

So whether or not a widely-circulated text is “good” or “bad” (questions teachers love to explore) is often not the point. The value for teenagers lies in how they can transform textual elements to their own purposes – complex practices which move well beyond school notions of “objective” analysis. This inflection process in itself can be pleasurable. Here Richard discusses the “right way” of appreciating a text, rendering the strategic reading processes explicit in relation to a film he had recently seen:

I really didn’t like [*Romy and Michelle’s High School Adventure*]. I’d bag it to people but this guy that I worked with, he didn’t like it at first either, but he just starting saying little stuff from it. It sort of got funny because he is a real funny guy. He’d just say something like “I believe we’re here to have a Romy and Michelle day”. I don’t know, it would really start to bug me and then I got used to it. Then I could see maybe some of the jokes could be funny if they were used *in the right way* [my italics]. So I sort of suddenly appreciated it a bit more.

What is vital here is to acquire an understanding of “the right way”. Social context is all-important, and the interactive aspect of meaning-making becomes obvious to Mike when he reappraises the film, *Men in Black*. On first viewing with male friends on a Saturday morning, he is nonplussed by the film, despite its hype. However, he revisits the film, this time with his older airforce trainee brother and his brother’s friends. This viewing in different circumstances enables Mike to “connect” with the film, with the changed context altering the reading of the same text:

...seeing it a second time I saw the film from a sort of different perspective. Some of the contributing factors might have been the atmosphere being at Crown casino at

9.30 on a Friday night, in comparison to 11.00 in the morning on Chapel. Added to the fact that the age of the people I was watching it with was about twenty and for most of the night we were discussing ways of sneaking me in to the casino (it didn't work) the movie took on a very different meaning for me. I probably learnt to appreciate the film from a different angle. [...] It was so much more interesting the second time I saw the film, I gave it a much greater chance too I suppose, the second time I really connected and saw the film for what it was and the way it sort of made fun of itself.

These kinds of textual “appreciation” lie at the heart of literacy. These students are engaging in complex dimensions of communicative competence *independently of teachers* in relation to their own cultural texts.

So where does the English teacher fit? Catherine Beavis articulates the link between personal and educational textual practices, implicitly suggesting where the teacher may find a productive role:

All textual practice, including reading, writing and discussion, engages questions of representation, negotiation and positioning – issues to do with how texts are read, and ask to be read; with representation of self, with ideology and identity (Beavis, 2000, p. 2).

Before looking more closely at pedagogy, however, let me offer another example of the ways that reading is powerfully connected to issues of identity. I also want to return to the issue of “reading up”, which is so often a feature of children’s attraction to more adult popular texts. Mike, whose actions and statements often suggested “typical” teenage male behaviour, included *The Lion King* as one of his popular texts. On first impressions, this appeared an odd inclusion beside the range of action and war films which were part of his usual diet. However, it becomes apparent that the film provided opportunities for him and his male friends to “rehearse” male adulthood identities:

Re *The Lion King* (I thought it would be better if I wrote about the time I first saw it in the cinema in Year 7) We (the boys) tended to talk quite a bit throughout the movie mostly relating it to other ‘grown up’ things for example one guy said rather loudly ‘gratuitous sex scene’ when the two lions were rolling about much to the horror of all the mothers watching the film with us. [...] the girls remained very quiet as a whole, however next day at school we talked about the movie non stop for some reason we were continuously relating it back to other things that we deemed more ‘grown up’ once more. We were saying things like imagine if the lion had a Sylvester Stallone voice or was modelled after Pamela Anderson (it is not our fault we were childish).

The film provided a “safe space” for the adolescents to practise adult ways of speaking, and promoted a public performance style of talk. Mike, as a 16-year-old, can comment ironically, but with a degree of accommodation, on his younger and more callow self. This in turn provides its own set of pleasures. Again, we return to the question of how such dimensions of literacy practices fit, or fail to fit, with school versions of literacy.

MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN OUT-OF-SCHOOL AND IN-SCHOOL TEXTUAL PRACTICES

Bernstein (1999) identifies everyday text practices as “horizontal discourses”. He describes these as likely to be “oral, local, highly context-dependent and specific, tacit, multi-layered and contradictory across but not within contexts”(p. 8). In contrast, sit vertical discourses, which are the more hierarchically-organised forms of knowledge valued by schooling. School forms of knowledge are linked to other procedures hierarchically and comprise structures of explicit knowledge

Bernstein makes no value distinction between the two; neither discursive structure is “better” than the other. So transience, or the more pejoratively-labelled “superficiality”, is not, in itself, a bad thing. However, to be successful at school, students have to acquire an understanding of the ways the texts of schooling operate “vertically”; an understanding which has little relationship to the segmentally-, or horizontally-organised forms of knowledge the students are used to. Within popular texts, there is a high turnover of both objects of interest and the demonstration of expertise in relation to them. As children’s interests are displaced, new expertise is required for them to pass as readers, and there is no necessary progression from one area of interest to another (Moss, 2000). “Learning” the popular is a hybrid, fluid procedure, no less significant (despite being far less valued) than more segmented forms of school learning.

Mary Hamilton (2002) sees these horizontal literacies as local, or “vernacular” literacies. She further defines their features in ways that are useful for broadening understandings:

- They have their origin in everyday life and are not often highly valued by institutions, who see dominant literacies as rational and of high cultural value
- They feature more often in private, rather than public spheres. They may often be humorous, playful or disrespectful
- They may be deliberately hidden, a way of creating personal space, e.g. secret notes, love letters, abuse, criticism, subversion, comics, scurrilous jokes, horoscopes, fanzines, pornography
- The practices themselves are not usually the focus of attention but are used to get things done
- They are hybrid in origin, part of a “do-it-yourself” culture and may be classified in more than one way, e.g. a newsletter may be a social activity or a political activity
- The boundaries of a single literacy event or practice may be blurred compared to school literacy, where learning is separated from use and divided into separate subject areas, or specialisms. “Knowledge” in school is often made explicit and is open to evaluation through the testing of disembedded skills (pp. 16-17).

So, what then does this suggest to teachers who want to make significant connections between students’ cultural worlds and the academic expectations of schooling? How can teachers bring the students’ worlds and literacies into the classroom in ways that extend their capacities as critical readers? And can we use popular texts in ways that keep students “on side”, or will they resent us appropriating their culture?

In my study, I encountered no resistance as an “outsider” dealing with popular texts and teenagers. Much of this lay with the fact that it was the students who introduced and represented the texts through their own talk. Acting as a facilitator requires the

teacher to actively listen to the ways that students talk about the texts. Such research demands a particular mindset for someone from a different generational culture. The role of popular culture in teenagers’ lives must be understood and not judged as inferior to an adult’s cultural preferences. According to Doecke & McCleneghan (1998, p. 50), the distinction between “high” and “popular” culture “merely signals different social and cultural contexts for making judgements about texts”. This recognition shifts the focus from teacher as guardian of cultural values to students and their *uses* of popular texts. These uses, or literacies, reflect understandings of cultural text/context relationships, purpose, audience and so on. Effective teaching makes these connections more explicit, always mindful of the valuing process that works between reader and text.

Further, densely social processes are at work in the ways that people choose to read films. Keeping this in mind, educationists need to remember that what students (or any readers) say about a text, particularly one that has considerable currency amongst their peers, cannot be read simply as transparent evidence of what they think. Existing social relationships between members of a group play a significant role in the ways that meanings are produced, as Mike’s discussion of *The Lion King* reveals. People might make positive claims about a text which in fact they disliked, or vice versa. Readers’ viewing positions are highly dependent on the social context, and a teacher must be aware of these dimensions of teenage (or any) talk.

My research indicates that students already have sophisticated ways of reading popular texts. However, young people do not always consciously evaluate or articulate the criteria they use to enhance their competence and make critical readings (Doecke & McCleneghan, 1998). The teacher’s aim, therefore, is to lead students to reflect more critically on ways of talking about texts *that they already have*, and thus develop a sense of themselves as readers of their own culture.

POPULAR TEXTS IN THE CLASSROOM

One way of encouraging students to be “apprentice theorists” (Comber, 2002, p. 11) in relation to popular texts might be to set up a developed, or staged reading approach. This would involve choosing a new, highly-anticipated text for a group to read/view/play. The teacher could have the students write down their expectations of the text and the reasons for holding those kinds of expectations. I tried this approach with *Terminator II* when it first appeared and spent several classes discussing the Arnold Schwarzenegger persona as well as the narrative image seen everywhere in the advertising – Arnie as a “killing machine” astride a motorbike, expressionless behind sunglasses and machine gun raised and ready for action. The students would read or view the text and write down their individual responses to the text. Group discussion would follow as students tracked and reflected on the development of their responses.

What kinds of texts have been important to them in the past? Now? What texts do they avoid? Seek out? Students can further develop a profile of themselves as particular types of film-goers, television watchers, music consumers and magazine readers. The students might list the terms they use for talking and rating their preferred texts. From this list, students can then think about what such terms seem to value and exclude, and thus develop a critical perspective of themselves as fans.

Lorraine Wilson (1999) uses pop music magazines to encourage critical perspectives with an upper primary class. The students were to read interviews with popular groups then write what they learnt and what they weren't told about the performers' lives from the article. From the series of interview questions, the students were required to think about why these types of questions were asked and not others. Many of the children, however, found this kind of critical distancing difficult to achieve. Wilson then devised two questionnaires about the children themselves – one directed to bring out the warm and fuzzy side of the children's natures (“How do you help your mum and dad at home?”, “What do you read in bed?”), the other to elicit the less attractive side of their personalities (“What's the worst thing you have ever done?”, “When are you mean to your brothers and sisters?”). The students immediately responded to the shaping processes inherent in language choices.

Discussion of favourite texts can move into genre, identifying different examples, defining their rules and conventions and speculating on the reasons for their appeal. In a media studies unit on reading the world of Disney, Nikki Beamish (2000) suggests designing a promotional poster to include as many key ideas as possible. Further discussion could flow from close readings of what was particularly emphasised on the Disney website, and why. Beamish also advocates the value of constructing a multiple choice quiz, with the students creating a range of possible answers and working to emphasise bias through language. All these processes contribute to highlighting the familiar, and have student readers come to see themselves as particular members of particular groups. This kind of recontextualisation is part of the process that schooling values in its vertical discourses, and begins the kind of bridging-of-learning approach that students need to move effectively between everyday and school knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Teenagers engage in a rich set of literacy practices when they take meanings from their preferred texts. Some of these resemble the more traditional practices of categorisation and critical analysis – approaches to texts with which English teachers are familiar. However, teachers are less cognisant of the ways that reading the popular connects students with specific ways of speaking, thinking, acting, believing and so on. Negotiating various cultural identities are processes fundamental to young people's lives, and popular texts provide students with powerful vehicles through which to do this. Moreover, the capacity of such texts to engage readers in discourse negotiation as well as more reflective thinking offers connections between informal and more formal, academic literacies. There are creative and strategic, as well as critical energies at work in reading the popular, which deserve to be more centrally placed in the literacy classroom.

Answers to the test:

1. Delta Goodrem
2. Hughsey, Kate and Dave
3. Emma
4. Phoebe, Paige and Piper
5. The green goblin
6. Richard

7. Evan
8. PS2
9. Sam Bennett
10. 2

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