

TRANSFORMATIONS: INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

This workshop began with an exploration of various conceptual frameworks for textual study, including semiotics, Media Studies and Art and Design references. This theoretical base was applied to a range of text types to indicate inventive ways of approaching critical analysis in the secondary curriculum. The session concluded with some textual transformation exercises to consolidate the ideas visited during the workshop.

This workshop set out to explore what we might mean by 'reading' in a society where much of the information received by citizens comes from multimodal sources. It began from the premise that current assessment models of 'reading', and associated panics about low levels of literacy, are founded on a limited notion of what it is to be a reader in a digital age.

The objectives of the session were to:

- consider what 'reading' means in 2008
- explore notions of *transformation*, *appropriation* and *intertextuality*
- consider the effectiveness of a range of conceptual models and key ideas in supporting critical reading of a range of cultural texts
- investigate some practical classroom outcomes which emerge from these sorts of consideration

SETTING THE SCENE

The workshop opened with delegates 'sleevefacing'. This is a ludic activity where people take the cover sleeves of 12-inch vinyl records and integrate them into photographs of themselves. They thus momentarily 'become' Bert Kaempfert, Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis or whoever.

Having shared their work with the whole group, delegates were asked to consider whether 'sleevefacing' was a creative activity. Without exception, all considered that it was, and an exploration of what each of us mean by 'creativity' followed. Our own definitions were then compared with one taken from Ken Robinson's on creativity in education *All Our Futures*:

'...the process of imagining, supposing and generating ideas which are original, providing an alternative to the expected, the conventional, or the routine.'

The next term explored was 'original'. There were reservations about using that term as a way of judging the quality of work produced by pupils in any of the arts. With the exception of a few iconoclasts, delegates agreed with the views of various critical positions presented for consideration:

'Immature poets imitate: mature poets steal.'

T S Eliot in an essay on Philip Massinger

'When a man of genius steals, he always makes the thefts his own.'

George Saintsbury on Laurence Sterne

'Much of the interest of works of art lies in the ways in which they explore and modify the codes which they seem to be using.'

Ferdinand de Saussure

THE BIG IDEA

The main hypothesis for the session was introduced next:

- To be literate in the twenty-first century means understanding a wide range of text types, both print-based and audio-visual
- Learning how to read in this paradigm of the term should embrace both ANALYSIS and PRODUCTION in a range of textual forms
- It should embrace an investigative, exploratory, dialogic approach in which students are offered a variety of routes to explore meaning

The definition of a dynamic reader, taken from the recent report Reading for Change as part of the OECD's Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA), was used to further exemplify the complex process. The report asserts that dynamic readers:

- Question and challenge
- Make connections
- Envisage, speculate and predict
- Play with ideas
- Keep options open as they read

INTO THE INTERTEXT

Discussion was next shifted to consider Ferdinand de Saussure's contention that:

'Much of the interest of works of art lies in the ways in which they explore and modify the codes which they seem to be using.'

The idea of appropriation was introduced. Culturally we have become used to sampling and remixing. Shakespeare appropriated previous texts to base his plays; Baz Luhrmann appropriates Shakespeare and MTV to create 'Romeo + Juliet'. Be-bop jazz musicians like Charlie Parker appropriated George Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm* and sampling DJ's appropriate Parker. The history of film is appropriation from other forms – technically from the magic lantern and the Daguerrotype (the Realist tradition) but also narratively/fantastically from strip cartoons, pulp novels, Wild West shows and melodramatic theatre. In fact there are those who argue that in a post-modern world, it's *all* about appropriation. Certainly our introductory encounter with 'sleevefacing' was an appropriative act.

Delegates next investigated two appropriations from recent magazine productions and considered how the intertextuality was working. The first was a *Skymag* front cover and inside feature in which Kelly Brook had been dressed and posed as Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*. The second was a Radio Times front cover that appropriated the film poster for *LA Confidential*. Discussion centred around the way in which the connotations had worked for individuals within the room. A significant point was underlined: when working with this sort of material in a classroom, there are no 'correct' answers. Students are being asked, 'what do you think the meaning is?' They can't be wrong – but they must be encouraged to justify their own reading.

ACTIVE APPROACHES TO TEXT

Three different but interrelated texts provided an opportunity to think about offering students different routes into the way meanings operate in text.

Firstly, delegates were introduced to the key questions developed by Rod Taylor to support students' critical study of art works:

Content: content of the work in terms of subject matter; its significance, how the artist has accumulated the information

Form: formal qualities of the work; its arrangement into shapes, its form, the colour scheme employed

Process: techniques, processes and methods involved in the making of the work

Mood: mood, atmosphere or feeling evoked by the work

The delegates then took one of the areas – mood – and applied it to the linocut *The Actors* by the South African artist Randy Hartzenburg. They were asked to consider the following:

- Can you imagine what the artist's feelings were while producing the work?
- Is the work quiet/noisy, soothing/disturbed, happy/sad, relaxing/jarring, angry/calm?
- Is your mood simply the one of the moment or has the work directly affected you?
- If the latter, what qualities in the work so affect you?

The same set of questions were then applied to a literary text, the poem by Niye Osundare *Not My Business*, and found to offer help in reading words as well as art works. The third stage was to watch a transformation of the poem into a filmed performance by John Agard. With this version of the text delegates were asked to consider the extent to which Roland Barthes is correct to assert that the 'grain of the voice' exceeds the verbal meaning of a text. This section concluded with a consideration of T S Eliot's identification of the objective correlative as a driver for connotation:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

This sort of comparative reading, setting different texts against each other to reveal potential connections and meanings which might otherwise have not emerged was offered as an alternative to the way literature, in particular, is often presented. To conclude, a short video clip of disaffected, under-achieving Year 10 boys from Woodhey High School in Ramsbottom indicated the power of transformative activity using a production rather than an analytical paradigm to engage reluctant readers and help them make meaning from texts. They were given a copy of the poem *Nothing's Changed* by Tatumkhulu Afrika and asked to make it into a short film.

The workshop next moved on to an exploration of 'art' film – extracts from two of William Kentridge's animations, *Mine* and *Ubu Tells The Truth* – using the Key Concepts from Media Studies specifications:

Audience: Who are the texts aimed at, who will see them, and how will they receive them?

Media Language: How are meanings being created by camera shots, editing, mise-en-scène, sound, performance and other aspects of moving images? How important is narrative in the text? How are stories being told and structured?

Representation: How are characters, groups of people, places and ideas being portrayed? Whose viewpoint are we seeing things from?

Institution: How have the texts been produced, who have they been produced by, and why? And crucially, how has this affected the meanings created by the texts?

Just as Rod Taylor's questions designed for Art and Design had proved helpful in exploring poetry, the Media Studies concepts were able to throw light on the meanings created by a work normally only accessed in a gallery context. Work produced by Y9 students as part of an Art and Design project which had begun with a critical study of the Kentridge films was screened to indicate some classroom applications of this element of the workshop.

The final critical transformation studied was the promotional pop video. In *Dancing in the Distraction Factory* Andrew Goodwin argues that pop video is far more than just a vehicle for selling music. It has developed into a cultural form of its own – and one which has significantly shifted ways of 'reading' moving image works. Classical Hollywood continuity editing is replaced by non-linear narrative, characterised by jump- rather than match-cutting and more concerned to capture the mood or tone of the original song than necessarily tell a story with a beginning, middle and end.

The framing for an analysis of textual examples was provided by Andrew Goodwin's categorisation of pop promos into three types:

Illustration: the most straightforward – a very literal set of images. Everything in the finished version derives directly from the song

Amplification: elements are added to the original. The mark of the auteur director will be evident, but the video enhances or develops ideas rather than fundamentally changing them

Disjuncture: here a whole new set of images are constructed, with abstract ideas sometimes making little initial sense. Often arty bands are promoted by this approach to stress their originality

The view was expressed that this framework is helpful in distinguishing between different texts and helping students answer the crucial critical question 'how does this text create meaning when writing about pop video. It can also prove instructive when students come to make their own pop videos, a common occurrence at both GCSE and A Level Media Studies. The session played out with a finely crafted student production which had appropriated the BBC re-make of Lou Reed's *Perfect Day*. Its deft humour returned us appropriately to something akin to a moving version of the sleeveface.

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