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## Critical Media Literacy after the Media Alfabetización mediática crítica en la postmodernidad

*This article questions the relationships between literacy, media literacy and media education. In the process, we connect the findings from a range of our ethnographic research and use these to propose new forms of practice for critical media literacy. By 'after the media', we do not posit a temporal shift (that 'the media' has ceased to be). Instead, we conceive of this as akin to the postmodern – a way of thinking (and teaching) that resists recourse to the idea of 'the media' as external to media literate agents in social practice. The preservation of an unhelpful set of precepts for media education hinder the project of media literacy in the same way as the idea of 'literature' imposes alienating reading practices in school. Just as the formal teaching of English has obstructed the development of critical, powerful readers by imposing an alienating and exclusive model of what it means to be a reader, so Media Studies has obscured media literacy. Despite ourselves, we have undermined the legitimation of studying popular culture as an area by starting out from the wrong place. This incomplete project requires the removal of 'the media' from its gaze. The outcomes of our research thus lead us to propose a 'pedagogy of the inexpert' as a strategy for critical media literacy.*

*En este trabajo se reflexiona sobre las relaciones entre alfabetización, alfabetización mediática y educación para los medios, relacionándolas con los hallazgos de diferentes investigaciones etnográficas, a fin de proponer nuevas formas de práctica para la alfabetización crítica en los medios. Vivimos en la postmodernidad, en la era «después de los medios» –y no es que ya no existan los medios–, sino que, por el contrario, surge una forma de pensar –y enseñar– que se resiste a la idea de considerar los medios como algo ajeno a la ciudadanía en la vida cotidiana. Para el autor, la permanencia de preceptos y prácticas anquilosadas sobre educación en los medios dificulta la puesta en marcha de proyectos de alfabetización mediática, al igual que una visión tradicionalista de la literatura genera prácticas viciadas de lectura en el aula. La enseñanza formal de la lengua ha obstaculizado el desarrollo de lectores críticos y competentes, imponiendo un modelo de lector unidimensional. Igualmente, los estudios mediáticos han ensombrecido la alfabetización en los medios, subestimando la legitimidad del estudio de la cultura popular en sí misma desde un punto de partida erróneo. La educación en medios es aun una asignatura pendiente y requiere un cambio de perspectiva. En este artículo, fruto de investigaciones, se propone una «pedagogía del inexperto» como estrategia para la alfabetización crítica en los medios.*

*Educación crítica, educación en medios, lectura, pedagogía, estudio de medios, educación, alfabetización mediática.  
Critical media literacy, media education, reading, pedagogy, media studies, education, media literacy.*

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## **1. Introduction: Media Literacy**

The need to set one literacy apart from another can only be explained by a need to use the concepts for other reasons, that is, to strengthen the professional status of its constituencies, or to take issue with the approaches used by proponents (Tyner, 1999: 104). The convergence of findings from ethnographic research projects undertaken over the last three years provide us with some new and deeply problematic research questions related to the term «media literacy» (Bennett, Kendall and McDougall, 2011). Here, in bringing together the accumulative outcomes of this research, we propose new models of practice that embed the process of meaning-making – as opposed to the media (or its various forms of content) as central to critical media literacy.

Media literacy has never been an accepted and cohesively defined idea. The UK media regulator OFCOM offered a pragmatic definition of media literacy as consisting of three competences – accessing, communicating and creating. But Bazalgette is only one of a number of media educators who finds the term problematic. The very term «media literacy» is inherited from an outworn and discredited 20th century tactic; that of adding the term «literacy» to topics and issues in an attempt to promote them as new and essential aspects of learning (Bazalgette, cited in Murphy, 2010: 24).

If we consider that, a year after offering this critique at the European Congress of Media Education Practitioners, Bazalgette convened an international Media Literacy Conference in London, the complexity of the issue is apparent – media education practitioners use the term for pragmatic and political leverage whilst arguing for alternative semantics with one another. Bazalgette's preference is simply to return to a reframed version of literacy as opposed to a set of variants (media literacy, new literacy, digital literacy, game literacy), but –as we shall discuss– David Buckingham (2010; 2011), another leading protagonist in media education – is highly skeptical of «multimodal literacy» work. Buckingham has recently observed the declining prominence of media literacy in policy rhetoric and implementation, from the peak in attention shortly after the inception of OFCOM – a regulator charged with a neo-liberal agenda for equipping citizens with the necessary competences for responsible participation in digital media – to the current reformulation of this as «digital literacy» – a more industry-friendly version, further away from the conceptual and critical practices of media education:

There is now an urgent need to sharpen our arguments, and to focus our energies. There is a risk of media literacy being dispersed in a haze of digital technological rhetoric. There is a danger of it becoming far too vague and generalized and poorly defined – a matter of good intentions and warm feelings but very little actually getting done (Buckingham, 2010: 10).

There is a deep irony in the link between any kind of formal education and digital literacy, of course, which is simply but powerfully expressed here by Instrell who remarks that «we are all aware of the bizarre fact that the only time many learners are not connected digitally is when they are in the classroom» (2011:5). For Buckingham, three obstacles are identified as impeding a more far reaching implementation of critical media literacy, of which the move to «digital literacy» is just one. The other two are the Media Studies 2.0 intervention (Merrin, 2008; Gauntlett, 2002) which he derides as a patronizing and naïve «techno-euphoria», and the renewed interest of media educators in «the literacy brigade» from whom media educators have developed a set of approaches to a «multimodal media literacy lens» (Instrell, 2011) which Buckingham views as an over-extension of linguistics into social theory. These three developments, he suggests, have served to, in different but connected ways, undermine the potential of media literacy to be taught as a kind of critical thinking – instead, technology, textual modes and overstated claims to democratization are celebrated uncritically and the educational response to them is reduced to a set of competences and skills.

The way out of these various cul-de-sacs would appear to be a sharper focus on the objectives of critical media literacy in the twenty first century – a clearer view of what we want to achieve. It is our contention, though, that this can only be achieved if we first depart from the idea of the media itself as, fundamentally, it is this mythical construct – ignored by media educators in the «internal politics» we have described here - that has most seriously impaired our vision.

## **2. Contention: Looking at the media**

The media, as more than merely a technical grammatical plural, is constructed out of a need to preserve a status outside of it, to maintain it as other, to be looked upon with the pedagogic gaze through judgments which - in the case of media literacy - are conservative in their preservation of the idea that there exists the media to be critical about. The media exist no more than literature exists. Both are constructions, demarcated for particular forms of pedagogic attention but neither are read critically, in Gee and Hayes' sense (2011: 63), by students.

Our argument here is not an extension of the much-contested idea of Media Studies 2.0 although we have found that intervention helpful in so much as it has asked us to re-connect media education to people and disconnect from the media. We do not subscribe to any technologically determined paradigm shift. But we do propose that new digital media has created a visible space for what was already happening in between people and media – and hence we can see more clearly now what was already, but less observably, there. Going back to the multimodal, new digital media does serve to complicate beyond repair the idea of the singular text:

Even if you don't accept the ecological metaphor, there's no doubt that our emerging information environment is more complex – in terms of numbers of participants, the density of interactions between them, and the pace of change – than anything that has gone before (Naughton, 2010: 10).

Laughey (2011) also derides Media Studies 2.0 for its over-stated technological determinism, lamenting what he sees as a move away from «critical thinking» and, in this sense, his views chime with Buckingham's. However, in seeking to offer an alternative, Laughey adopts a Leavisite «enrichment» position:

Those positive standards of quality, whether in literature, drama, music, film, television, radio, in the press or on the web remain constant. Rather than appealing to the lowest common denominator of mass appeal and sentimental melodrama, the best of popular culture captures something original and progressive about the social, political and moral attitudes of its time. That's why we will always value Hitchcock over Hammer Horror, «The Wire» over «Without a Trace», The Beatles over The Bee Gees, serious over citizen journalism. (Laughey, 2011: 16)

Laughey here reinforces the (unhelpful) binary opposition between an «uncritical» embrace of the supposedly democratizing impact of new digital / social media and this «canonical» idea of «serious» critical study. Neither, of course, are helpful. Instead, in the interests of a universal project for critical media literacy, we should be thinking reflexively about the way that cultural products connect with peoples' construction of their selves and how media play a part in performance of identity – through affiliations and affinities that signify within language games and foster the connecting of people to one another – on or offline. A critical understanding of how we attribute meaning to cultural material, along with how we attribute meaning to ourselves – must surely be the «key competence» of media literacy.

### 3. Methods

The argument we present here is a summary of a convergence of a range of research outcomes, pedagogic strategies and dialogic work with texts of various kinds conducted over the last three years (Bennett, Kendall & McDougall, 2010). Our agenda is to raise a set of important and challenging questions for everyone concerned with media education and its current and deeply problematic variant – media literacy. The findings from three specific research interventions form the basis of our later discussion and suggestions for critical media literacy in the future. This article cannot provide substantial detail on these individual research projects, all of which are discussed in other articles, as our focus here is on the collective weight they add to our argument and how we can locate this in current discussions about the future of media literacy. However, a summary of each intervention is as follows.

More broadly, a critical discourse analysis of Subject Media (the institutional form of media education) involved a deconstruction of the assumptions at work, and their manifestation in social pedagogic practices in the teaching of the key conceptual framework for media education. To this end, each of power, genre, representation, ideology, identity, history, audience, narrative, technology and pedagogy itself were the subject of discourse analysis, in response to which a series of strategies for dealing with (or dispensing with) each concept «after the media» were proposed (Bennett, Kendall & McDougall, 2011). Informing this were a critical discourse analysis of the socio-cultural framing of Subject Media (McDougall, 2010) and the three interventions we turn to here - research into perceptions of reading and being a reader by participants in the Richard and Judy Book Group (Kendall & McDougall, 2011); a mixed-methods study of male teenage gamers telling stories about their experiences in «Grand Theft Auto 4» (Kendall & McDougall, 2009) and a «multi-modal» remixing of Morley's Nationwide Study (1980) with contemporary application to audience groups' engagements with «The Wire» (McDougall, 2010). Each of these research studies were analysed for their potential to transgress orthodox «othering» arrangements of teacher-student and media-audience which, we argue, serve to reproduce culture and power relations that exclude by the imposition of self-regulatory identity-practices. Our thesis for *After the Media* is, then, informed by this series of ethnographic research interventions that have explored various ways of «doing media literacy» by fixing our attention on people and how they attribute meaning to culture and to their own reading and literacy practices – ways of being with others, and the role that media might play in this.

#### **4. Results 1: On Being a Reader**

For this study (Kendall & McDougall, 2011) the discussion prompts offered for the discussion of particular novels on the website of the Richard and Judy book club (<http://www.richardandjudy.co.uk>) were analysed in relation to ideas about literature, reading and being a reader with particular attention to what the function of the interactive new media context for this might be.

Collins (2010) observes the transformation of American literary culture into popular culture and the role played by new digital media in this genealogy. Alongside institutional determinants related to the convergence of publishing and other media forms, Collins describes a fragmentation in the dynamics of access to literature: A number of other factors are the result of changes in taste hierarchies – the radical devaluation of the academy and New York literacy scene as taste brokers who maintained the gold standard of literary currency, the collapse of the traditional dichotomies that made book reading somehow naturally antagonistic to film going or television watching, and the transformation of taste acquisition into an industry with taste arbiters becoming media celebrities. And perhaps the most fundamental change at all, the notion that refined taste, or the information needed to enjoy sophisticated cultural pleasures, is now easily accessible outside a formal education. It's just a matter of knowing where to access it, and whom to trust (Collins, 2010: 8).

Collins does not appear to be concerned with further dismantling the categories at work here - «refined taste», «sophisticated cultural pleasures» and, of course, the idea of literature itself. Nonetheless there is a resonance here with the project of media literacy and in particular the claims that Media 2.0 has a similarly fundamental impact on cultural hierarchies. To what extent, though, can these «taste dynamics» change purely through access alone, if the contextual elements of «distinction» (Bourdieu, 1984) and textual value remain intact?

An example of the kind of «celebrity arbitration» Collins describes, in the UK, is the Richard and Judy Book Club. However, whilst clearly offering an «out of school» route into engagement with literature, our research suggests that this new popular cultural domain, in its provision of prompts for reading group discussion of its listed novels, operates in a hybrid space between opening up reading to an audience connected by a daytime TV show and maintaining schooled literature appreciation discourses. In this example, the imposition of the idea of «thematic significance» is discussed:

Readers are interpellated into the act of discussing something that is assumed to exist – thematic significance. This is presented as objective, in that such a theme can only be significant if it exists and can be looked at and known as such, outside of the thinking of the reader. There is no space for the reader to think that the phrase is not thematically significant, or that themes are questionable or that the idea of lines from a novel echoing other lines is subjective. (Kendall & McDougall, 2011: 18)

Just as this «reaching out» by the Richard and Judy group on behalf of and by the idioms of «Subject English» is a conservative practice, so too can media literacy be viewed as an intervention which appears more progressive than it has proven – in its normative and regulatory impact - to be.

The theorisation of reading practices at work in research into literacy is fundamental to the study of how people attribute meaning to media but that this domain has been largely ignored in favour of reductive models of media literacy. Ideas about reading in the discourses of media literacy are very similar to those that dominate other text conscious subjects like English and, so, a cross disciplinary idea of reading is in place that is rarely challenged - what Bernstein might call a «horizontal discourse» (1996). A multimodal, or «transmedia» approach will not in and by itself do much to subvert this more general meta-narrative of sense-making that understands text, reader, author and reading in particular as bound concepts - stable, fixed and certain - contributing to meaning making and taking in obvious and predictable ways.

#### **4.1. Results 2: Just Gaming**

Assessing the outcomes of a study (Kendall and McDougall, 2009) of young male players of «Grand Theft Auto 4» and how they talk and write / blog about in-game experiences in relation to theories of narrative from Subject Media, our approach to play was concerned with the brokering of particular ways of being in different modalities of practice. Participants play with the game, against and through the game for multiple audiences (us, each other, the online community) performing and re-performing versions of their (male) selves. To re-think young men's participation in game cultures as a form of ritualised performance opens up new possibilities for re-reading the functionality of gaming in young peoples lives.

A group of 16-17 year old players were connected on a Facebook blog, sharing, to an open brief, narrative accounts of their gameworld experiences in the weeks after the release of the game and were subsequently interviewed with a set of common questions followed by supplementary enquiries to explore the style and content of their blog posts.

Drawing on post-structuralist understandings of self, Gauntlett reminds us that «we do not face a choice of whether to give a performance. The self is always being made and re-made in daily interactions» (2002: 141)

and it this performativity that is central to constructions of gender. What became quickly striking was the manner in which our participants, although on the surface interacting with a text that has been derided for its apparently amoral representation of vice, were contemporaneously playing with identities in ways which might be described in Maclure's (2006) terms as «frivolous». Maclure understands frivolity as «whatever threatens the serious business of establishing foundations, frames, boundaries, generalities or principles. Frivolity is what interferes with the disciplining of the world» (2006: 1). Furthermore, it is precisely this kind of posturing that Butler (1990) advocates in her incitement to make gender trouble.

Through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity. (Butler, 1990: 33-34)

We could, perhaps with some surprise, see our gaming participants as engaged in radical moves that threaten the stability of the binaries around which moral panic discourses converge. The participants shared an explicit and «knowing» meta-awareness of how to play against, with or despite the narrative that resonated with Gauntlett's idea of the postmodern «pick and mix» reader of magazines which are understood to offer possibilities for «being» that «might» be engaged with dialogically as the (female) reader is invited to play with different types of imagery (Gauntlett, 2002: 206). Such shared and quasi-conventional «parology» (Lyotard, 1985) – new moves in the game that disrupt orthodox analyses of effects and of reading itself – are perhaps our most compelling evidence that there is no singular way of being in a game – more of an event than a text – like «Grand Theft Auto 4». This has clear and present implications for the key concept of audience in media education.

Such playfulness around identity stands as further evidence (if needed) of the need for a re-reading of masculinities as a way of re-positioning young men in relation to textual and literacy practices. Rejecting the discourses that locate male readers as victims and losers in terms of achievement in literacy, a further interpretation of our data allows us to construct the figure of the «baroque showman» – the fusion of «I» as player and «I» as character (Nico) as an act of resistance against becoming the object of study with the truth of identity eluded and eclipsed by the camp humour of the interplay. Such self-knowing, critical posturing queers, in Butler's sense, what it is possible to know, in the sense of grasp, about young people's engagement with popular textualities. For the development of critical media literacy, the acceptance of this is surely fundamental.

#### **4.2. Results 3: The Audience (Remix)**

Taking season 4 of the US drama «The Wire» (which deals with the US school system), we have explored (McDougall, 2010) how it might be possible to remix Morley's Nationwide study and in so doing we were unpacking much of the Media 2.0 thesis to challenge the part of that intervention which might assume too much about the end of the hierarchical nature of media production and reception at the same time as wanting to try out the move from doing Media to doing people. A major component, theoretically, of this intervention was the thinking through of secondary encoding as a refinement of Morley's model. But in this account, we will concentrate on the act of mapping the event of «The Wire» by the research participants to their textualised lives.

Five participant groups –all located in different ways in relation to formal education– were given different methods with which to reflect on the drama in relation of their lifeworlds. From online critics to a group of youth workers, a preferred reading emerged but differently constructed for each group. Media teachers provided an intertextual metalanguage coded as a semiotic chain of meaning (or a taxonomy in their words), with their own identities woven in. They assumed that the proximal relations of «The Wire», «Do the Right Thing» and «Public Enemy» – and the meanings attributed to such by white professionals (as several choose to identify themselves – an important detail since ethnicity was not a marker for this study) would be understood. Drama lecturers were alike in their eagerness to discuss «The Wire» as a text, but more comfortable with a discourse of cultural value, and more distant from the form – television. Though their acquisition of cultural capital was close to their media counterparts, their mapping of the text to their lifeworlds came less instinctively. The youth workers appeared to have the most at stake, contrasting greatly with both the media teachers (for whom the reality depicted is mediated through other media references) and the drama teachers who confessed to having little direct experience of such aspects of social reality. For the youth workers the preferred reading was apparently articulated through lived experience either in the present or projected into the future (it's gonna come down on us). And subsequently there was less interest in the text, the craft or its objectives. For the education students a great deal was also at stake – their life experience and proximity to

the social reality represented was closer to the youth workers, but their optimism for change marked their responses as different to all of the other groups - including the online critic-fans.

For audience after the media, what this study revealed about «The Wire» is far less interesting than how the research methods allowed for some more experimental and reflexive work with people. The reasons for the nuances and markers in the data from each group are not only a product of location in educational social practice but also by the research method – which was different for each group – employed. Critical media literacy research might, then, adopt this kind of «mash-up ethnography» to move away from the text to explore in new ways how people in culture attribute meaning to media – the event.

## **5. Discussion: Scales from Eyes**

Jenkins (Berger & McDougall, 2011) draws our attention to a new kind of relationship between people and media: This represents a fundamentally different culture than one where media production and circulation is almost entirely professionalized. And in many cases, we are seeing what educational theorists describe as legitimate peripheral participation - that is, they are actively watching how culture gets produced with the recognition that they can engage and join the process when they feel ready (Berger & McDougall, 2011: in press).

Jenkins is drawing here upon the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), who observe the process by which individuals make the move from peripheral participation in social apprenticeships' to full participation. With this analogy we can develop a model of social learning by which students, through their participation in social media education, progress from being peripheral to full practitioners in media audiences. So we are no longer looking at the audience as an object of study or at our own audience behaviour as reflection. Instead we are conceiving of full participation in culture as the key learning outcome. This full participation –«situatedness» in Lave and Wenger's terms– leads to the making of meaning and the articulation of identity, learning to articulate in culture, through and with media, as opposed to learning from the articulations of others – whether elite producers, canonized texts or legitimated fans. Once again, it is the construct of the media which has denied us this opportunity, as a «big Other» it imposes a distributive model of social capital whereby this currency is always-already and can only be acquired in relation to its normative gaze –social capital achieved through the academic modality– being critical about the media, or through the vocational modality – working within its idioms to gain access. The in between space will be a community of practice in which texts, events and exchanges are produced in the practice but the media is ignored.

However, might it be that this kind of «legitimate peripheral participation» was always-already a feature of our engagement with culture and mediation and the role of online digital media has merely been to make it visible? In this more mundane sense we can see more clearly now, in the public domain, hitherto private attributions of meaning, affinity and, perhaps, creativity. If we are to find new ways of doing critical media literacy in this context, a new kind of pedagogy will be important – a pedagogy of the inexpert. To use Lave and Wenger's terminology, the apprenticeship we want students serve is not craft or skill determined, but rather that they are apprentices in theorising their culture. Critical media literacy teaching must strive to facilitate «mastery» in a metalanguage which gives voice to reflexive negotiation of identity – a kind of «culture literacy».

Through a pedagogy of the inexpert we draw alternative subject positions for teachers and students engaged in critical media literacy work, predicated on models of post-structuralist educational practice but we refresh these for the contemporary environment in which, we suggest, the fluid, context bound and socially embedded nature of textual relations are more ordinarily and routinely fore-grounded. The apparent paradox of the inexpert teacher is purposeful and intended to communicate a shift in teacher expertise from orientation towards a mastery model of specialist content knowledge to a co-constructivist ethnographic model of finding out that takes as its common sense that the textual object is a fiction of textualisation to which models of reading are indexed and from which the traditional tools of critical literacy emerge.

The model of practice we're proposing is predicated on a model of reading which explores meaning-making as a category. That is to say, rather than elucidating something about genre, narrative, content or author, instead the practice is to ask - how meaning-making is learned; what different kinds there are; what it is; who it is for; what sorts of things signify expertise; and what sorts of meaning-making are done in different kinds of contexts? This approach asserts as primary the constructedness of reading (and attributing meaning) within the context of cultural practice whilst simultaneously noticing the positioning and rootedness of individual agency within wider social relations. Couldry (2000) pays attention to the trajectories of individual agents negotiating «textual fields» through the «total textual environment» and this offers a new focus for the type of exploratory work that inverts the dynamics of traditional investigative endeavour of text conscious subjects from a concentration on text to a focus on people. This does not imply the mass demographic, projected idea of

audience but instead a sense of real readers in real contexts, readers that Hills recognises as «textualised agents [who] make certain texts matter in a way that allows new, text-derived, social groupings to emerge» (2005: 29).

We can begin to see that a critical pedagogy founded on this set of ideas might look very different to the kind of textual analysis and audience research models we have been used to because a pedagogy based on this kind of understanding will of necessity be process rather than content orientated. That is to say the focus of study will not be the text but the tracing and analysis of textual fields, the choices individuals make as they negotiate myriad texts and the common patterns in their selections. The work of the teacher in this version of textual practice is to facilitate ethnographic enquiry that enables young people to read the «textualized stories of their lives» (Kehler & Greig, 2005: 367). This is what we think of as critical media literacy. Far removed from OFCOM's key competences, Internet safety and digital literacy but also resistant to the technological determinism and binary oppositions of Media Studies 2.0 and its skeptical respondents and, crucially, more critical – in the move away from the media towards being with others and with media – than the linguistic determinism of multimodality.

For Gee and Hayes (2011), the most profound effect of digital media is its breaking down of the restrictions of literacy –who has the access to the means of production of knowledge. The implications of this for pedagogy are obvious– the barriers between the expert and the student mirror, in some ways, those between the professional author / journalist / producer and the amateur / apprentice. Enacting this kind of pedagogical practice requires a very different kind of teacher expertise, of course. We need a reading of teacher identity against the grain to accept our awareness of, but unfamiliarity with and inexpertise in the particular textual fields of learners and the ways they make texts matter. The role of the teacher in this dynamic is to facilitate and scaffold the auto-ethnographic story-telling of learners and to accept and embrace the more uncharted, unknowable learning spaces that emerge, learning spaces that, we assert, are charged with productive possibility.

In simple terms, despite the arguments over access, participation, technological affordances and what happens to literacy in new media environments, there is a shared desire amongst media educators to find a way of doing critical media literacy at this time, in this changing landscape. In many ways, our pedagogy of the inexpert is nothing new – we merely extend existing ideas about facilitation and the shared construction of knowledge, along with elements of «deschooling». However, our observation that the exclusive categories of teacher / student cannot be challenged without doing the same to media / audience is we hope, more considered, subtle, cautious and critical than Media 2.0 and yet calling for change, for a shift in our practice is at the heart of our analysis. The incomplete project of critical media literacy can be resurrected through the formulation of new local rules and microstrategies for learning about how textual experience – but not the media – is part of making sense of ourselves and how we might be together.

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