Teaching about Television

Teaching about Television

Len Masterman

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First published 1980

Reprinted 1982, 1983 (twice), 1984, 1985, 1987

Published by

MACMILLAN EDUCATION LTD

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS

and London

Companies and representatives

throughout the world

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Masterman, Len

Teaching about television.

1. Television broadcasting — Study and teaching

I. Title

301.16 1 HE8700.6

ISBN 978-0-333-26677-9 ISBN 978-1-349-16279-6 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-16279-6

For Paula and Edith

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Acknowledgements

To:

The IBA. Without the support of one of their excellent Research Fellowship awards, this book would never have seen the light of day. The book does not, of course, necessarily represent the views of the Authority.

Charles Mayo of the IBA for all of his patience, co-operation and help.

Professor Stuart Hood, for his continual advice and active support.

Ed Buscombe, Manuel Alvarado and Bob Ferguson for their interest in my work and their generous and helpful comments upon early draft material.

Dr John Daniels, Wyn Williams and Dr Paula Allman, three great educators to whom I have a general indebtedness; I have learned more from them than from a library of books.

Adrienne Edwards, Pat Hughes, Audrey Eaton, Jill Cleaver and Marian Anderton, who have provided impeccable secretarial assistance in the face of indecipherable handwriting.

John Wightman for technical and photographic assistance.

The following friends and colleagues, who have all in different ways influenced this book:

Dr John Baggaley
Andrew Bethell
Terry Dolan
Gillian Dyer
Mike English
Richard Exton
George Foster
Brian Glover
Felicity Grant
John Hardcastle
Noel Hardy

Colin Harrison
Heather Hillier
Vale Humble
Douglas Lowndes
Andy Mead
Hugh Morris
Chris Mottershead
Bob Osgerby
Alan O'Shea
John Thompson
Professor Ted Wragg

xii *Acknowledgements*

All of the pupils who participated in my television classes, and who tolerated my mistakes. My debt to them – whether their work is represented here or not – is an obvious one.

My wife, Paula, for her unstinting support and superhuman understanding, and for clarifying many of my ideas for me over a late-night pint.

To all, my gratitude and thanks.

The courtesy of the following is also acknowledged for permission to use copyright material from these sources:

S. M. Jourard and the Cambridge University Press for Figure 1 from the *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, vol. 5 (1966) p. 229; Dr Barnardo's for Plate 1; *TV Times* for Plate 3; John Timbers and *Radio Times* for Plates 2 and 4; TOPIX (Thomson Regional Newspapers Ltd) for Plate 5; Michael Simons and Cary Bazalgette, with Simon Clements and Andrew Bethell, for Plates 6, 7, 8, 9; Richard Hoggart and Chatto and Windus Ltd for *Speaking to Each Other (i) About Society*; Sheed and Ward Ltd and Penguin Books Ltd for *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire; Eamonn McCann for 'The British Press in Northern Ireland'; Dennis Potter and *New Statesman* for 'Lost Horizons'; Richard Collins and the BFI for *Television News*; Tom Burns and Macmillan, London and Basingstoke, for *The BBC*; John Dearlove and *Index on Censorship* for 'The BBC and the Politicians'; Times Newspapers Ltd for my own pieces on 'The Burke Special' and 'Mastermind'; and, with Albert Hunt, for 'When to Say No'; Trevor Griffiths and Faber and Faber Ltd for *Comedians*; Random House Inc. for *Culture Against Man*; Dr Desmond Morris and Jonathan Cape Ltd for *The Naked Ape*.

November 1978

LEN MASTERMAN

Introduction

by Stuart Hood

Why teach about television?

One answer is that television can be used as a substitute for literature. If pupils read little and watch television instead, some teachers argue, then perhaps television may provide surrogate material for 'appreciation' and for content analysis. Others see in the use of television a means of self-expression or self-discovery; it has to be added, however, that the first enthusiasm for electronic equipment has waned somewhat. Others still, aware of the growth of media studies at centres of higher education, respond by teaching about television in the context of the wider study of other media: film, the press, photography, advertising. It is part of that inevitable process whereby what has been incorporated in the syllabus at a higher level finds its way down into the secondary schools. Len Masterman belongs to none of these tendencies. What inspires him to propose that we teach children about television is the view that television has replaced film as the most important mass medium; the knowledge that children, who may go to the cinema twice a year, view for more hours per week than they spend in school; and the conviction that these children can only benefit from an understanding of the medium from which they will derive, over their lives, the greater part of their information and entertainment.

To those who object that much of television is trivial and suggest that school time might be better employed than discussing, for instance, situation comedy or football on television, Masterman replies that, in crucial ways, what is said on television is less important than how it is said. What pupils who are taught about television should become aware of is that television has a language of its own with which values are suggested, attitudes reinforced and statements conveyed about society, the family, male-female relationships. The language is a complex one consisting not only of words but of gestures, the way a shot is framed, the way opening titles are designed, the way an announcer is dressed, the way a studio is furnished. In short, he sees television as a conveyor of ideology – an ideology which is the more effective, the less easy to challenge, if the viewer is convinced that the medium is transparent. For ideology on television depends to a large degree on the

impression that its images are as apparently unmediated as water, gas or electricity appear to be when we turn on a tap or switch on a light.

Granted the desirability of teaching about television, how does one set about it? Are the concepts basic to a critical theory of the medium – for that is what Masterman is propounding – not too sophisticated for school children who will not necessarily go on to media studies at a polytechnic or university or seek careers in the mass media? They are children who are likely, as he points out, to have been discouraged by the schooling process from believing in their own judgements even when, as is the case with television, they are highly familiar with the subject matter. His answers to the question are concrete – accounts of teaching methods, of exercises in perception and in visual analysis from which teacher and pupils can proceed together to a discussion of the television image and its connotations. The examples he gives of work in this area by children, even when their capacity for formal expression is limited, show that they are – if well taught and rightly encouraged – capable of discussing some of the fundamental questions dealt with in courses on media studies. It is not the subject matter itself that presents the difficulty but the teaching method to be adopted.

One of the pedagogic problems posed by teaching about television is that the children are likely to be familiar with a wider range of the subject matter than the teacher. It is a situation which Masterman sees as capable of positive exploitation in that it permits the teacher to adopt a new and fruitful role – not that of a source of authority who knows the ‘right’ answers but of a collaborator in the exploration of an area of knowledge. It is at this point that his views on the importance of television as a subject mesh with his desire to see educational methods radically altered. Masterman believes that many of the techniques practised in schools and taught in colleges of education are calculated not to educate but to cut children off from learning. A system which is based on the retrieval from memory as quickly as possible of the ‘right’ answer is allied to a competitive ethos of which marks and ‘places’ are the rewards and expression. It is a system which is calculated to produce in a number of children a block that inhibits learning. Thus for most of my schooldays I was unable to count because of fear and embarrassment at not being able quickly and readily to produce ‘correct’ solutions and of frustration at not being able to ask what seemed to me to be highly relevant questions; it was only much later that I found that it was possible to think about numbers as one thinks about words. Anyone who has shared this experience will concur with Masterman in opposing competitiveness and what he calls the ‘banking’ system – the injection of knowledge by the teacher for retrieval at some later date when the proper stimulus is applied – and in opposing an educational system which tends to produce citizens who are as unquestioning about society as they are about the nature and import of the messages they receive each evening on their television screens.

It is important, however, not to fall into extremes of pessimism when

discussing the television audience. There is probably – this is not an area much explored by audience research – a rather widely diffused scepticism in parts of that audience about what they see on their screens. Men and women workers from Fords who had taken part in mass meetings and voted there were, when interviewed by a student from a London polytechnic, highly critical of the way in which an event in which they had participated was filmed, presented and commented on in television news. It was clear from their responses to questioning that they had a clear understanding of the nature of mediation, of the power of editing and of the importance of the shot. What they lacked were the concepts to allow them to analyse their reactions. What Masterman would like to see is a generation of school-leavers going out into the world already armed with these concepts and accustomed to forming independent judgements not only about television but about the society in which they live. His proposals are innovatory in terms of pedagogy and society, admirably interesting on both counts, and, unlike much current work on the media, they have the virtue of being lucidly written and easy to read.