

## Chapter 12: Uncertain Springs of Activism: Walking with Hoggart

Julian McDougall, Pete Bennett, John Potter

### Abstract

This chapter, in presenting adapted extracts from a book length project, revisits Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and argues for a theoretical, socio-material reclaiming of *media* literacy, a now established strand of the new literacies, through a return to Hoggart's concerns and his connecting of literacy to personal, community and cultural lives.

Hoggart was writing about the transition between literacies experienced at a time of great **uncertainty** by, in his words, the working classes. From their perspective, and through his own lived experience of this uncertainty, he sought to write about the benefits of 'mass literacy' for education and mobility, as well as about the dangers of persuasion and cultural debasement and the uncertainty of identity experienced by those 'moving up' through their uses of literacy.

Revisiting what we see as Hoggart's contribution to the project of 'drawing attention to the discursive frames that shape everyday lives and the literacy practices that are a part of them' (Jones, 2018) serves both to **unsettle** the seemingly neutral, competence and skills-based framings of media literacy and to consider the extent to which the uses of media **unsettle literacies**. Whilst there is much to challenge in Hoggart's observations, we argue that going beyond the focus on class to 'walk with' an intersectional, dynamic 'take' on the socio-material approach taken in Hoggart's *Uses* has much to offer research in our current times that seeks to better understand the lived experiences of the benefits and risks of digital, media literacies as well as the **precarity** of digital inequalities (Helsper, 2020).

**Keywords:** Media, literacies, inequalities, precarity, ethnography

This chapter, in presenting adapted extracts from a book length project, revisits Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and argues for a theoretical, socio-material reclaiming of *media* literacy, a now established strand of the new literacies, through a return to Hoggart's concerns and his connecting of literacy to personal, community and cultural lives.

Hoggart was writing about the transition between literacies experienced at a time of great **uncertainty** by, in his words, the working classes. From their perspective, and through his own lived experience of this uncertainty, he sought to write about the benefits of 'mass literacy' for education and mobility, as well as about the dangers of persuasion and cultural debasement and the uncertainty of identity experienced by those 'moving up' through their uses of literacy. The precarious transition point at which Hoggart made his contribution is similar to now—from literacy to mass literacy then and into media literacy now—with another set of appeals and encouraged attitudes. As Rancière observes, 'the things that matter for theory turn up at crossover points where the different jurisdictions disappear' (Rancière, 2016; 32).

Revisiting what we see as Hoggart's contribution to the project of 'drawing attention to the discursive frames that shape everyday lives and the literacy practices that are a part of them' (Jones, 2018) serves both to **unsettle** the seemingly neutral, competence and skills-based framings of media literacy and to consider the extent to which the uses of media **unsettle literacies**. Whilst there is much to challenge in Hoggart's observations, we argue that going beyond the focus on class to 'walk with' an intersectional, dynamic 'take' on the socio-material approach taken in Hoggart's *Uses* has much to offer research in our current times

that seeks to better understand the lived experiences of the benefits and risks of digital, media literacies as well as the **precarity** of digital inequalities (Helsper, 2020).

In *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Hoggart set out ‘questions of approach’, concerned with avoiding a romantic or sentimental view of the past when assessing the ‘debased condition’ of working-class culture at his time of writing. His ‘rough definition’ was born of the necessity to find a focus and to justify his experiential approach, his situated and ‘bodily’ investigation. His interest in the thick description of ‘less tangible features’—manners of speaking, clothes, habits and aspects of the social practices of community—has since been celebrated as a methodology, a form of auto-ethnography. *Uses* has been described as ‘more lived, more partial and more felt than the many academic books in the tradition of the New Literacy Studies’ (Pahl, 2020: 132).

### **Unsettling Landscapes**

Looking at the contested uses of media literacy obliges a focus on what we mean by media, class and culture 60+ years on from Hoggart’s ethnography. ‘Doing Hoggart’ on media literacy, or reviewing ‘The Uses of Hoggart’ for media literacy, makes progress towards some recommendations for how media literacy can and *should* reclaim its own (contemporary) class consciousness, away from deficit models and protectionism towards an intersectional critical pedagogy which has too often been lacking. As Hoggart says, ‘A great deal has been written about the effect on the working-classes of the modern “mass media of communication”’ (1990:27).

Hoggart was concerned about massification's impact on 'the common speech'... 'on oral and local tradition' which he saw as weakening but still possessing 'remarkable life', but rather than addressing this local tradition contemporaneously, Hoggart relied largely on the Hunslet of his childhood for his benchmarks (1990:27). As much ethnographic work continues to show, working class experience is not a 'Landscape with Figures' but rather a collection of semantic eco-systems, teeming with life. Here are communities legitimizing the work they are doing among themselves, fulfilling Peim's desire for 'a multi-directional thing, a mobile theory of texts, language, the subject, subjectivity' (Peim, 1993: 3).

Repeatedly questioning Hoggart's evidence and methodology, critics like David Buckingham see Hoggart's methods as problematic, particularly given the widescale impact *The Uses of Literacy* has had: 'Hoggart seems to have reached his conclusions merely from superficial observation...' (Buckingham, 2018: 2). This critique is borne out across *Uses*, largely by Hoggart's honest accounts of data collection; for example, the evidence bases for his analysis of the local oral tradition somewhat lack precision: 'These examples were all collected in a deliberately short time...from a ...Waiting room of a children's clinic.' (1990:27).

Opportunistic, certainly.

Hoggart's anxieties about the age of massification proved largely unfounded: if anything, the late fifties, sixties and early seventies proved an unprecedented period of working class credibility and creativity. However, in our time, the transition from the age of massification to something more fluid, globalised and digital, in the absence of requisite radical political settlement, has indeed precipitated a crisis. Media literacy education is entering a maturation phase, characterised by exploration of the social practices of media education and the complexity of human engagements both with media and with ways of being literate in the

mediated social world. In response, the research field is beginning to acknowledge the complexity of ‘dynamic literacies’ and experiment with pedagogies that combine and/or cross boundaries between spaces and roles—the classroom and the extended ‘third space’, teachers and students working in partnership to co-create learning, and professional development in hybrid combinations of physical and virtual networks. This *dynamic* approach to media literacy (Potter and McDougall, 2017) puts the influence of Hoggart and Cultural Studies, together with the methodologies of new literacy studies (Gee, 2015, Street, 2003, Kress, 2003), more actively into media education research to offer a more agile, responsive and inclusive, intersectional way of seeing media literacy and its uses.

## **People**

Thinking about the *uses* of media literacy, makes a pitch for a shift in (or to) *method*, towards, put simply, ways of seeing literacy better in the networked, digital, social media and data age (Potter & McDougall, 2017; Williamson, 2016; Cannon, 2018; Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020; Helsper, 2021). Using Hoggart to explore the difference media makes to literacy and asking how education should respond to this requires a departure from his frames of reference to consider how the uses of media literacy relate to feminism, critical race theory, social class, post-colonial, intersectional approaches and post-humanism, and how these perspectives, political objectives and international contexts can ‘decenter’ the field of media literacy education. Like Kate Pahl, we see Hoggart’s ‘legacy’, albeit flawed, as an ‘imaginative sensibility, which could be understood as a complex response to lived life and its potentialities and emergence... a way of being and knowing that was not entirely academic but drew from experience’ (2014: 5). Media literacy has not done enough of this kind of work, so far.

And yet it must be acknowledged that the field of media literacy is itself another other.

Hoggart's 'Them' are constructed as the other by a working class 'group sense' of threat from a 'shadowy but numerous and powerful group, affecting their lives at every point' (Hoggart, 1957, p53). Hoggart avoids the term 'community', concerned not to obscure the tensions inherent to the collective and ambiguous views of social mobility enabled by literacy. The literacy 'ladder' was, for example, for Raymond Williams, a prime symbol of a meritocracy, which 'weakens community and the task of common betterment' and 'sweetens the poison of hierarchy' (Williams, in Littler, 2016; 54). The 'other' are the subject of mistrust, rather than fear, an attitude which is less prevalent among youth. A particular anxiety pervades around the imposed obligation for a 'double eye' (p. 57), a plural 'way of seeing' oneself both as an individual and a citizen in democracy, both of which come with duties which may conflict or at least pose complications.

Today, trust in the mainstream media 'Them' is, arguably, in crisis. But on the other hand, the algorithmic insulation of group sense adds a new layer of ideological closure, a new mode of conservation. Now, the construction of the 'Liberal Elite' is provided as a 'Them' by another 'Them'—a complex, double layering of the mass persuaders, whereby the media literacy of the group is used to offer a credible pre-prepared 'Them'. The shadowy group is thereby displaced and hidden, as a more visible, life-affecting other is located as the problem. In the mobilisation of this persuasion, 'The Media' is set up as complicit in this 'world of Them'. In Hoggart's understanding, such a process would not happen organically, from within the group; the desire to conserve, resist change, close in and avoid internal disruption would make this kind of sudden uprising against the political class and journalists unlikely.

Both of these domains would be the subject of benign scepticism in favour of ‘putting up with’ or even sustained enthusiasm as the development of the digital (mass) mediascape is simply an ongoing transition to the ‘uses of media literacy’.<sup>1</sup>

In Hoggart’s reading the separation [them/us] has the effect of marginalising “them” because “they” have no place in “our” world. It is therefore a device for deflating authority, but significantly, it is a means to designate and pinpoint those who are seen as a threat to the separation. (Gregg, 2006: 38).

Hoggart’s interplay of cultural and material relations might at first seem a stretch too far for the project at hand, the application of his thinking to the (digital) media ecosystem. To re-state, our field’s characterisation of ‘us’ for this project describes a less agentic relationship with media than Hoggart implies—either an inability or a lack of desire to look beyond immediate circumstance and detachment (on both sides) from the normative systemworld literacy as framed by formal education. The group must also be understood as an ‘othering’ device for the lower middle classes who see social mobility in their own experience and intersectionally; in this sense there are many ‘us’ and they converge as one ‘us’ for us, here, in some ways but not others. This is quite different to the more obvious acknowledgment that *“You are bound to be close to people with whom you share a lavatory in a common yard.”* (Hoggart, p60). And yet several writers who offer accounts of working class life today, and evoke Hoggart in different ways, would appear to resist such a narrative of then and now:

Had the social changes he documented been deeper and more effective at erasing class distinctions, I wouldn’t have spent the last fifteen years or so repeatedly looking

---

<sup>1</sup> This, and related arguments in this chapter, are based, with permission, on work which first appeared in McDougall, J., Bennett, P. & Potter, J. (2020) *The Uses of Media Literacy*, London: Routledge.

to his work for its continuing relevance to my life. I am, in his words, one of the ‘uprooted and anxious’: at one socially mobile and psychologically stuck, or at least divided, somewhere between our place of origin and the place we inhabit in order to ‘get on’. (Hanley, 2017: xii)

### **Precarity: The (Ongoing) Age of Anxiety**

Selina Todd (2018) deconstructs enduring myths about social mobility: its representation as purely statistical; entrepreneurship as the route to advancement; the success of selective education and low aspiration as an obstruction; the necessity of imitation of those higher up the ladder; the framing of social mobility as a social good and its status as an essential lever for policy with the objective of empowering people with control of their situations. The sum of these discursive parts gives us a sobering antidote to the idea that Hoggart was then and media literacy is now:

Policy debate has been fixated on the minority who experienced upward social mobility in the last century, and has suggested that their gains—uneven and ambivalent as they were—outweigh all the injustices perpetrated by a hierarchal capitalist society on the majority. (Todd, 2018: 19)

The role of literacy education in both offering a route to ‘mobility’ and creating a nomadic anxiety was described by Hoggart himself, many times, and echoed by Hanley. This paradox remains at the heart of the discussion of social class, precarity and literacy in the United Kingdom and is a context for media literacy here in a way which is, perhaps, less pervasive elsewhere.



In *Respectable* (2017), a personal story of crossing class divides, for example, Lynsey Hanley makes over a hundred references to media texts—including in her title—and cites Hoggart on thirty-three pages of 227. Those mediated reference points are sometimes environmental/incidental (*The Mirror*, *Titbits*, *Motown*), the popular culture that was in the house or on the screen, sometimes ‘played out’ at school, so curated socially (Adam and the Ants); sometimes they are bound up with her more personal curation of class identity (*NME*, *Frankie Goes to Hollywood*, *New Order*, *Billy Elliot*); sometimes they speak directly to habitus and anxiety (*Private Eye*, Shakespeare refusal); sometimes they anchor her writing to moments in history (Oasis and the ‘third way’); and sometimes they seem to be put to work as a play on Hoggart: ‘I must stress that I wasn’t reading sociology books whilst working at a mass circulation magazine (*Heat*) to annoy people, it was more the case that I liked both’ (p. 163).

In *Lowborn* (2020), an exploration of poverty in contemporary Britain, Kerry Hudson is restricted to environmental descriptions of texts that were ‘around’; in her account of material lack, the privilege of mediated curation is absent. But like Hanley, Hudson describes the *use* of popular culture as both social container (Richards 2017) and form of escape in the playground (routines from *Dirty Dancing*, *Kylie and Bros*, *Footloose* and *Grease*). At college, *Melody Maker* provides the same signifier as *NME* does for Hanley, but for Hudson culture is less a matter of choice. The most striking resonance with *Uses* describes her mother’s curtailed mobility:

She enrolled in an OU course in English, read Dickens and spent hours in an armchair with a cheap notepad and biro trying to write her essays, but gave up after the first one saying her tutor ‘didn’t get it’. (2018: 124)

A ‘vivid’ analysis of the uses of *media* literacy, then, demands another ‘us’, partly for the reasons addressed in the opening chapter, new ways of seeing ‘the working class’, not to refute the evidence cited in surveys and the arguments above, but partly also to decentre and decolonialise ‘the group’. If the media literacy researcher and/or educator is ‘positioned as a human agent within a dynamic process’ (Jones, 2018: 23) and is thus to bear witness to the ways in which people in everyday literacy practices use digital media to interact with wider sites of social struggle—as opposed to acquiring them as competences or lacking them as deficient—then they must capture as ‘core behaviour’, as opposed to radical exception, techno-social repertoires that challenge a rudimentary updating through Hoggart’s line of sight:

When we examine black feminist use of social media, we see that they are constructing ‘publics’ that are both individual and communal, local and global, cathartic and revolutionary. Networking allows them a pluralism that is antithetical to essentialism and demands an interactive collectivism that is both a model for and product of contemporary black feminism.  
(Matthews, 2019: 391)

This view of the construction of digital media assemblages as *model for and product of...* is, we argue, *media* literacy’s dynamic variation on Hoggart’s anecdotal ethnography of conservation. If the group has been hitherto obstructed from constructing its public sphere, then the mass culture will enable a very different kind of transition, a much closer focus through Jones’ reframing social justice lens on ‘abject’ communities—resonating with our working definition from

the field. Hanley accepts as enduring Hoggart's "*distinction between a cynical mass culture and the kind of culture we can produce if we're encouraged to do it for ourselves.*" (214). So, in looking for disruptive uses of social media, for example, either for new modes of civic engagement (Mihaildis, 2018), identity work in conflict and crisis zones (Melki, 2017) or 'woke' intersectional reading such as Matthews describes, we move beyond and above models of deficit and competence or the banality of 'screen time' discourse—perhaps this would be the easiest updating of 'the mass persuaders'—to really claim a 'vivid' assessment, decentering the white working class, in a dialogic relation with other 'objects' to view the 'fundamental shakiness of the social escalator' (Hanley, p159) from other perspectives.

Clearly, what is being 'put up with' still, now, is *even* more unsettling, disruptive, intolerable even: a pandemic with savagely stratified impact on communities; austerity with no end in sight; climate crisis; decreasing living standards, rendering mobility, to the extent that it can be a viable 'way out', even more unlikely. What would Hoggart offer as 'vivid and detached analysis' of the lived experience of the precariat class, the zero hours, 'gig economy' operatives comprising the new 'precariat' (Savage, 2015)?

To see Us differently also—indeed most urgently—requires an acceptance that *we* might be Them: 'In order to transform the institutional culture within academia to one that is culturally democratic and equitable, white students and staff need to become active participants in challenging whiteness' (Gabriel, 2017: 33). Just as (or rather even more than) we might have paid great attention to the kinds of nomadic anxieties or traversal of habitus clash that Hoggart articulated and Hanley re-set, in the name of 'widening participation', Gabriel's necessary challenge is to see the intersectional marginalisation of the black, female academic.

As whiteness and maleness continue to trade with rich capital dividends, media literacy can only be inclusive for social justice if it starts out from a deconstruction of these ‘interlocking systems of privilege and oppression’ (Douglas, 2012: 1,267). We might ask: Can the experience of the black, female academic be seen to equate to that of Hoggart’s ‘scholarship boy’, Hanley’s ‘joyless traipsing up the social ladder’ (p. 147) or Hudson’s ‘vertiginous feeling’ (p. 3)? Yet, clearly, our question re-sets the wrong order; it reduces, by proximal relation, the experience of the former to the vertical (white) discourse of the latter. Kwhali describes the lived experience of the ‘accidental academic’ without the means to trade whiteness:

I will never entirely reconcile the personal and political meaning of my race, class and gender within a higher education setting constructed around the epistemology of whiteness, maleness and class divisions... None of the institutions at which I have worked has attempted to understand how racial aloneness is experienced or how the knowledge that arises from my gender and race co-exists alongside the need to satisfy the white criteria of meaning. (Kwhali, 2017: 5,21).

As ‘Why is my Curriculum White?’ has cast its lens, we see that the experience of ‘Us’, described by Kwhali, is not only about being with Them and being in Their space, but also about learning Their knowledge. The French Feminist Luce Irigaray complained that ‘They never taught us nor allowed us to say our multiplicity. That would have been improper speech.’ (Irigaray, 1992: 207) Hoggart’s scholarship boy is accepted into, but is then forever anxious in, an Enlightenment rhetoric—from the darkness of the Hunslet back street to the light of the academy *ex umbris in veritatem* (out of shadows into the truth). *Uses* does

not seem to question this epistemology. Can media literacy education promote social justice, then, without directly challenging inequalities, without *Teaching to Transgress* (hooks, 1994)? Doesn't media literacy demand learning contexts that deconstruct power dynamics and oppression in both media and education itself?

Such work is underway and it may be that our task is actually to move it from the margins of the field. Bali (2019) describes her situatedness:

As a postcolonial scholar teaching postcolonial students at a hybrid American/Egyptian institution, my approach to teaching digital literacies foregrounds reflections on identity and hybridity, a questioning of our own and others' biases while promoting empathy for "the other", and an exploration of equity issues in real life and in the digital realm, before delving into digital literacies and topics such as fake news, privacy, data and algorithms. (2019: 70)

The UNESCO declaration on Media and Information Literacy includes an objective to 'enhance intercultural and interreligious dialogue, gender equality and a culture of peace and respect in the participative and democratic public sphere' (UNESCO, 2016). Clearly, this is more than a literacy competence. Rather, it's the *use* of literacy as social practice in everyday life. As we've stated, Hoggart's 'blindspot' was to the dynamic uses of literacy. Whilst media literacy is subject to static and narrow *educational* uses, not very different from in the 1950s, we see 'the masses' engaged, in the lifeworld, in much more agentive, dynamic literacy practices than did Hoggart, and we think this is not because those literacy practices, enabled by digital media, *are* necessarily more dynamic, but rather that Hoggart's fixation on transition from 'good' working class culture to the mass media rendered them passive and static. He did not view literacy as a set of lived practices. We *do* see media literacy that way. Nor do we see

the digital as sovereign, and approach media literacy from a sociology of the digital. Instead, we see media literacy as only the latest chapter in the ongoing project of re-negotiating and better understanding what literacy means, how it is experienced, who is excluded from its educational framing and how that can change to include the people who are not silent but are not listened to. In this way, we are far more concerned, for media literacy, with “drawing attention to the discursive frames that shape everyday lives and the literacy practices that are a part of them, and disrupting these frames through research and practice which challenges how they are set” (Jones, 2018: 14). This means that we are indebted to Hoggart for his attention to the duality of literacy and the lived experience of it in cultural transition, but we need to depart from his textual value hierarchies to bear witness to the more complex uses of *media* literacy.

### **Walking**

Kate Pahl, in her deep ethnographies with families and communities around Rotherham, some thirty miles from Hunslet, accounted for the ‘not yet’ of digital literacies and the mediation of desires through media texts:

This world of the home, of everyday cultures, is like the domestic embodied world that Hoggart also recalled and evoked in *The Uses of Literacy*. This space is full of sayings, practices, stories from the everyday, with oral cultures enmeshed with everyday practices and linked, through inscription, to writing. By seeing a space as constructed and a site of possibility, it is possible to imagine Rotherham as rich and alive with culture. It is this Rotherham I describe here, while recognizing that the period Rotherham was currently going through as I was writing this book was intensely challenging, as services were cut back and benefits withdrawn from

families. But the traces and echoes within this landscape, sites of previous industrial activity and stories circulating within communities challenge contemporary conceptualizations of culture. (Pahl, 2014: 16)

We can take Pahl's return to Hoggart together with Susan Jones' ethnographies of everyday literacies through a social justice lens and the intersectional, black, feminist and postcolonial media literacy work in our field. That conceptual frame can further intersect with the emergence of post-human ways of thinking about media, life and agency and the convergence of dynamic, third space media literacy with civic engagement and activism. These alliances and intersects can help us set out the 'uses of media literacy' as a richer, more nuanced set of lived experiences and objectives for change than competence models can account for.

Hoggart observed the longevity of hard conditions and analysed the battle between a resistant, internal culture and the powerful, strategic interests of commercial media from outside of the group, presented as inside, interpellated as 'us'—'the gang's all here'. The resistance, in culture, was due to older, enduring values in and of the group rather than any coherent political movement. An epistemology of culture with a focus on transformation in social relations—as in the work of Kate Pahl and Susan Jones—seeks to articulate a different way of asking and answering questions. This assessment of the legacy of the original *Uses*, for Cultural Studies and, here, for media literacy, is about the importance of the enthusiasm of the discipline(s) to reinvent itself in the new problem space. This is our objective for the uses of media literacy.

This finessing of thinking on cultural studies and audience is available to later practitioners in a way that it was not at the time to Hoggart. He is, of course, endlessly reflexive in *The Uses*

*of Literacy*, but not in the same way as the contemporary researcher. For a start, his trajectory is more or less unknown in a discipline which is just forming, and he is not seeking the ontological security of the modern, reflexive subject (Giddens, 1991). Hoggart's reflexivity is backward looking, even as he is setting out the stall for much of what is to follow. At times he catches himself wandering into literary criticism, as in the long passage which links popular love songs back to the Elizabethan sonneteers, and yanks his own chain back towards the present popular cultural moment and the possible future foundation of cultural studies:

It is true that this kind of assertion in love-poetry has a long history – the Elizabethan sonneteers, for example, employed this and many other conceits. But reminders of this kind do not really help much; we have to keep our points of comparison and development much more close and relevant. (Hoggart, 2009, p. 205)

Media Studies, Cultural Studies, literacies, media literacy: These 'problem space' unsettling projects are, we would argue, often viewed in the same way still: not so much a 'curious coincidence', but part of the same excluding and self-perpetuating cultural power regimes that persist in both the academy and the media.

As intersectionality has been increasingly taken up, discussions have focused on key questions, dilemmas and approaches to investigation. One is the challenge of making power visible. There is also the question of how to identify and work with categories, or vectors, of analysis, in coherent but sensitive ways. (Nichols and Stahl, 2019:3)



Intersectionality has been viewed as a political and theoretical lens, informed by critical race theory and legal studies, but is also subject to questions of method which are useful and applicable to media literacy (Springgay and Truman, 2019; Taylor and Ivinson, 2013; Hughes and Lury, 2013; Bhattacharya, 2009; Jones and Shackelford, 2013; Bhopal, 2017; Barad, 2003; Bell, 2012; Wargo, 2019). Socio-material developments in academic and educational literacy work posit an engagement with intersectional materiality as dynamic agency in social meaning. We thus need to understand 'working class' uses of media literacy as more-than-human but also just as much stratified by inequality and power reproduction as 'just human' understandings. This amounts to decolonizing the epistemologies of media literacy, as opposed to seeing it as in itself a decolonising project for literacy. However, this must be undertaken with the acceptance that it will not be a solution to power struggles and intersectional, automated inequalities, as Bhattacharya describes:

Applying de/colonizing methodologies is akin to having pest control in my home. Even though my pest control man sprays once a month, I will never be completely free of pests. (2009: 1077).

Wargo writes about situated ethnography work with 'Gabe', who is observed performing the uses of media literacy as 'space-time-mattering' This is media literacy *in use* as 'a constellation of unfolding and enveloping, a being/doing/knowing of the world.' (2019:135). This kind of media literacy situates us as being always in the negotiation of knowledge about media and in mediation, returning to approaches we proposed in 'After the Media' (Bennett, Kendall and McDougall, 2011), as we are 'part of what we study, not above or beyond what we observe' (Taylor and Ivinson, 2013: 128). In the intersectional and post-human spaces of feminism, we can find valuable developments in the situated practices of 'patterning' literacy

work. In this way, relations between people, media and literacy will always be transforming as they are learned and taught (see Bell, 2012: 17). This is a kind of ‘doing text’ (Bennett and McDougall, 2016): literacy is in movement and methods are walking, but they are always subject themselves to ethical and political challenge, as ‘ethical and political domains of difference’ (Springgay and Truman, 2019: 39).

Researching *dynamic* media literacies means employing approaches to engage social actors as researchers of their lived experience; it means reflecting on identity, to try to get to richer, more personal ‘data’, with all the ethical issues that are so often hidden ‘below the line’ in research; it means bearing witness to how ‘people borrow and curate what is of interest to them in the “cultural stock” and then “mod” it and reflect their own interests and identifies’ (Cannon, 2018: 110).

Hoggart’s original concerns were around the mechanisms behind the production and subsequent consumption of popular cultural texts for, and to an extent by, the working classes. He aimed to take the reader-observer through the complexity of cultural (re)production and representation in popular weekly magazines, weekly and daily newspapers and popular songs and to explore how these reached out to audiences, noting along the way that popular culture was, in some respects, breaking down divisions between lower and middle classes, even as the popular reading matter circulating was of low quality and ‘holding people down’, signalling Bourdieu’s ‘distinction’ (1984, see also Grenfell and Pahl, 2018 and Lewis, 2021). In updating this to the present, we have to concern ourselves with the sites of cultural (re)production, how they have changed and how they are (at the very least) proposed as spaces for personal curation and co-production—the creation as well as the

consumption of texts by all for all—within the promise of a converged culture. The focus, though, will initially have to be on the ways in which digital culture reaches *particular* audiences who remediate and produce cultural texts.

### **Coda: Springs of Action**

Unbending. Adjective: not bending or curving; inflexible; rigid; refusing to yield or compromise; resolute; austere or formal; aloof.

Unhinge. Verb (used with object): to upset; unbalance; disorient; throw into confusion or turmoil; to dislocate or disrupt the normal operation of; unsettle.

Helpful ways of thinking awry from linearity and hierarchy which we can take from Deleuze and Guattari (2004) have informed feminism, intersectional literacies and post-humanism and are at work in the ‘walking’ approaches we want to apply to media literacy and its uses, to ‘walk with Hoggart’. Whilst the field of media and cultural studies is increasingly rhizomatic (see Harper and Savat, 2016, Moores, 2018), the institutionalized educational framing of media *literacy* is yet to embrace these metaphors, as it also sidesteps the enduring issue of class. A foray in the media literacy field in this preferable direction is made by Fiona Scott’s ‘sociomaterial nexus analysis’ of the media literacies of pre-school children. Specifically pertinent for our focus is Scott’s finding that:

Middle-class parents of preschool children tend to engage in ‘media practice schoolification’, meaning that they engage with a child’s interest in a media text and use it as the basis for engaging the child in ‘school’ or ‘formal’ literacies learning. In

working-class families, the ways parents extend their children's engagements with media map onto operational, cultural and critical digital literacies and some traditional operational literacies, but in ways that tend not to overlap with the literacy practices common in formal educative settings. (2018: 341)

This is a kind of middle class pedagogic 'rebending' of springs, but crucially, Scott's research does not support Hoggart's pessimism for the passivity of working class engagement with mass media. Instead, we can see that the working class family reception of media, their uses of media literacy, appear to be more of an assemblage; they 'plug in' to a wider repertoire than the restrictive schooled knowledge domain.'

Whilst it may be merely coincidence, it is purposeful at this juncture to observe the use of 'unbending' in Deleuze and Guattari's work, as the order of 'arborescent' thinking they seek to disrupt with the rhizome. A feature of the arborescent system is, along with vertical, static and sedentary hierarchy, that it is unbending. The rhizome is an underground system of roots, connections, flows and assemblages, profoundly 'bending'. Hoggart was using the metaphor of bending/unbending differently; in his work, the springs of working class cultural agency (his 'action') are straightened out in the gradual transition to an era of conformity to a passive media culture. But it is important to understand that 'rebending' those springs can only happen, through media literacy, through a dislocation of their structural causality—in other words, thinking differently about the latent energy in the springs.

The media literacy project—through dynamic, 'walking' with texts—is surely more about *unhinging* than unbending, displacing the 'unifying object' as a situated practice of media literacy work as patterning. The act of unhinging presents an energy, so we might see the

force of potential action in springs which branch out in unseen directions. People, things, texts and literacy are thus dislocated and deliberately unsettled (troubled) as we create new knowledge about them—thus moving the field out, sideways, underneath and across, to ‘some useful action to improve things’.

Hoggart ends his own conclusion with the question of how freedom can remain meaningful as technology develops and makes us feel ever freer, when we may be less free.

There is much to disagree with in *The Uses of Literacy* and much to dispense with now, theoretically and politically, for the work of *media* literacy.

But this is still the question.

## References

Barad, K. (2006) 'Posthumanist performativity : Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter.' In Deborah Orr (ed.), *Belief, Bodies, and Being: Feminist Reflections on Embodiment*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Bell, V. (2012) 'Declining Performativity: Butler, Whitehead and ecologies of concern.' *Theory, Culture and Society* 29(2): 107-123.

Bennett, P; McDougall, J and Potter, J (2020) *The Uses of Media Literacy*. New York: Routledge Research in Media Literacy and Education.

Bennett, P, Kendall, A and McDougall, J, 2011. *After the Media: Culture and Identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. London: Routledge.

Bennett, P and McDougall, J (2116) *Doing Text: Media After the Subject*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.

Bhattacharya, K (2009) 'Negotiating Shuttling Between Transitional Experiences: A De/Colonising Approach to Performance Ethnography.' *Qualitative Inquiry* 15(6): 1061-1083.

Bhopal, K (2017) 'Addressing racial inequalities in higher education: equity, inclusion and social justice.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40:13, 2293-2299.

Bourdieu, P (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.

Buckingham, D (2018) *The New Left and Youth Culture*. [www.davidbuckingham.net](http://www.davidbuckingham.net)

Cannon, C. (2018) *Digital Media in Education: Teaching, Learning and Literacy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F., 2004. *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Continuum.

Douglas, J (2017) 'The struggle to find a voice on Black Women's Health: From the personal to the political.' Gabriel, D and Tate, A (eds) *Inside the Ivory Tower: Narratives of women of colour surviving and thriving in British academia*. London: UCL Institute of Education Press.

Gee, J. P. (2015). *Literacy and Education*. London: Routledge.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity.

Gregg, M. (2006). *Cultural Studies' Affective Voices*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Grenfell, M and Pahl, K. (2018) *Bourdieu, Language-Based Ethnographies and Reflexivity*. London: Routledge.

Hanley, L. (2017). *Respectable: Crossing the class divide*. London: Penguin.

Harper, T and Savat, D. (2016) *Media After Deleuze*. London: Bloomsbury.

Helsper, E (2021) *The Digital Disconnect: The Social Causes and Consequences of Digital Inequalities*. London: Sage.

Hoggart, R. (1957). *The Uses of Literacy*. London: Chatto & Windus.

hooks, B (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Hudson, K (2019) *Lowborn. Growing Up, Getting Away and Returning to Britain's Poorest Towns*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Hughes, C and Lury, C (2013) 'Re-Turning Feminist Methodologies: From a Social to an Ecological Epistemology'. *Gender and Education*, v25 n6 p786-799 2013

Irigaray, L. (1992) *Elemental Passions*. (Trans. Joanne Collie and Judith Still). New York: Routledge.

Jones, S (2018) *Portraits of Everyday Literacy for Social Justice: Reframing the debate for families and communities*. London: Palgrave.



Jones, S and Shakelford, K (2013) 'Emotional Investments and Crises of Truth: Gender, Class and Literacies.' Hall, K; Cremin, T; Comber, B and Moll, L (Eds) *International Handbook of Research on Children's Literacy, Learning and Culture*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the new media age*. London: Routledge.

Kwhali, J (2017) 'The Accidental Academic.' Gabriel, D and Tate, A (eds) *Inside the Ivory Tower: Narratives of women of colour surviving and thriving in British academia*. London: UCL Institute of Education Press.

Lewis, M (2021) A critically-engaged syncretic language narrative of two building trades students and their families: developing identity-resonance for self-actualising minorities' right to be, believe and belong. Bournemouth University: Doctoral Thesis:  
<https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/35201/>

Littler, J. (2013). 'Meritocracy as plutocracy: the marketising of 'equality' within neoliberalism.' *New Formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, 80-81, pp. 52-72. doi: 10.3898/NewF.80/81.03.2013

Livingstone, S and Blum-Ross, A. (2020) *Parenting for a Digital Future: How Hopes and Fears about Technology Shape Children's Lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Matthews, C (2019) ' 'Woke' and reading: Social media, reception, and contemporary Black Feminism.' *Participations* 16:1; 390-411

McDougall, J. Bennett, P. & Potter, J. (2020) *The Uses of Media Literacy*. London: Routledge

Melki, J (2018): 'Towards a media literacy of the oppressed'. In: *The Media Education Research Journal*, 8(1), 5-14.

Mihailidis, P (2018) *Civic Media Literacies: Reminagining Human Connection in an Age of Digital Abundance*. New York: Routledge.

Pahl, K. (2014). *Materializing Literacies in Communities: The Uses of Literacy Revisited*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Pahl, K., and Rowsell, J., with Collier, D., Pool, S., Rasool, Z., and Trzacak, T. (2020) *Living Literacies: Re-thinking Literacy Research and Practice through the Everyday*. Boston: MIT Press.

Peim, N. (1993) *Critical Theory and the English Teacher*. London: Routledge

Potter, J., & McDougall, J. (2017). *Digital Media, Culture and Education: Theorising third space literacies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer.

Rancière, J. (2016) *The Method of Equality*, Cambridge; Polity Press

Rancière, (2010), *On Ignorant Schoolmasters* in Bingham, C. & Biesta, G. (2010) *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*, London: Continuum

Richards, B (2017) *What Holds Us Together: Popular Culture and Social Cohesion*. London: Karnac Books.

Scott, F (2018) *Young children's engagement with television and related media in the digital age*. Sheffield: University of Sheffield (PhD Thesis).

Springgay, S and Truman, C (2019) *Walking Methodologies in a More than Human World*. London: Routledge.

Street, B. (2003). What's "new" in new literacy studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current issues in comparative education*, 5, 77-91.

Taylor, C and Ivinson, G (eds) *Material Feminisms; New Directions for Education*. London: Routledge.

Todd, S. (2014) *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class*. London: John Murray.

Unesco, (2016). *Riga Recommendations on Media and Information Literacy*:

[http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/Events/riga\\_recommendations\\_on\\_media\\_and\\_information\\_literacy.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/Events/riga_recommendations_on_media_and_information_literacy.pdf)

Wargo, J (2019) 'Lives, Lines, and Spacetime-mattering: An Intra-Active Analysis of a 'Once OK' Adult Writer' Kuby, C; Spector, K and Johnson Thiel, J (eds) *Posthumanism and Literacy Education: Knowing/Becoming/Doing Literacies*. London: Routledge.

Williamson, B (2016) 'Digital education governance: Data visualization, predictive analytics, and 'real-time' policy instruments', *Journal of Education Policy*, 31(2), 123–141.

Williamson, B, Eynon, R & Potter, J (2020) 'Pandemic politics, pedagogies and practices: digital technologies and distance education during the coronavirus emergency.' *Learning, Media and Technology*, 45:2, 107-114.