Entertainment and/or/not education

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Ava Parsemain's book *The Pedagogy of Queer TV*, the latest volume in the Palgrave Entertainment industries series, explores the ways in which television teaches audiences about queer issues, queer cultures and queer people. In doing so, this important book raises a vital, much broader, question: What would happen if we abandoned the whole 'media effects' tradition of studying entertainment and instead turned our attention to the study of entertainment's education? That is to say: if we stop asking, 'how was a consumer impacted by entertainment?' and instead ask 'what did she learn from it,?' how might our approach to culture change?

The relationship between entertainment and education is currently a vital one for academic researchers, not only for instrumental reasons like improving vital practices such as sex education, but also to help us understand broader questions about how culture works. The Palgrave Entertainment Industries series addresses entertainment as a distinct cultural system, asking how it works and what we can learn from it. In this book,

Ava Parsemain takes a case study of entertainment and (queer) education about sex to explore the ways in which education through entertainment differs from – and might even offer us innovative ways to improve – the education offered by formal teaching institutions such as schools and universities.

In a previous book in this series I proposed that we might take a broadly tripartite taxonomy to understanding the relationship between culture and its audiences:

- The educational model of culture: you *must* consume this text or you will fail the course;
- the arts model of culture: you *should* consume this text because it is good for you;
- and finally, the entertainment model of culture: What texts would you like to consume? (McKee 2016, p. 33)

In the realm of sex education, entertainment is often held up as the bad object, the cause of negative 'media effects' on young people's sexual development (see for example Brown & Bobkowski 2011; Collins et al. 2004; Eyal & Kunkel 2008; Kunkel, Cope & Biely 1999). Much academic research on sex education tends to assume that parents (Collins et al. 2004, p. e288) and schools provide a positive 'corrective' (Fisher & Barak 1989) to the assumed negative teachings of the entertainment media about sex. The fact that this assumption is common among academics as well as journalists and popular audiences may obscure the fact that there is little evidence that the sex education provided by schools and parents is in fact any better than that provided by entertainment. Research into the sex education provided by parents in Australia, America and the UK consistently shows that many parents are simply not providing sex education in any meaningful way; and when they do so are presenting messages that sex is negative. As one study with fourteen and fifteen year old Australians notes:

> It was clear from the focus groups that the majority of parents do not talk to their children about sex in any substantive way. Focus groups allow us to see not just what people say but how they say it. It was a recurring theme in these groups that when asked whether their parents had addressed a particular aspect of sexuality education with them, members of the group would simply recite, one after the other, 'No', without any hesitation, caveats or discussion:

> Fac: And again do your parents talk to you about sex at all?

> 8.F.3: No.

> 8.F.4: No.

> 8.F.5: No.

> 8.F.2: No.

> 8.F.1: Kind of but not really, like they'll just be like don't have sex because you will get pregnant (McKee, Dore & Watson 2014, p. 658)

In schools, young people describe the sex education they receive as being about 'mechanics' (Carmody 2009, p. 42), 'plumbing' (Carmody 2009, p. 59) 'puberty, procreation and penetration' (Sorenson & Brown 2007, p. 34):

13.F.6: It's not – it's all scientific though, it's not more . . .

13.F.2: It's not in relation to your life. It's just . . .

13.F.4: Yeah.

13.F.6: Education about the disease.

Fac: Okay.

13.F.6: Yeah, and how it works. And how it works in your body. And I'm, like, 'Yeah, stuff that.' You wouldn't really talk about in everyday life.

13.F.2: Yeah.

13.F.6: But, 'This works like this because of the two x-proteins and all that stuff like that'.

13.F.4: Yeah.

13.F.6: You wouldn't say that in an everyday conversation.

13.F.4: No.

13.F.2: 'Did you know that the protein coating of AIDS changes that's why they can't cure it?'

13.F.4: Yeah, exactly (McKee, Dore & Watson 2014, p. 656)

There exists an extensive academic literature identifying the most important elements of sex education for young people. They want to understand the emotional side of physical intimacy – how to start, manage and if necessary end relationships, and understand the place of love and physical intimacy in them (Allen 2008, p. 573; Buckingham & Bragg 2004, p. 56; Carmody 2009, p. 59; Department for Education and Employment 2000, p. 11; Halstead & Reiss 2003, pp. 33, 120; Parks 2010; Tacchi, Jewell & Donovan 1998, p. 12). And they want to understand how to make physical intimacy more pleasurable for themselves and for their partners (Allen 2005, p. 60; 2008, 573; Buckingham & Bragg 2004, p. 56; Carmody 2009, pp. 59, 60; Fine & McLelland 2006, p. 328; Halstead & Reiss 2003, pp. 33, 194; Parks 2010; Sorenson & Brown 2007, p. 34). Neither parents nor schools are providing substantive education about these issues. In this context young people inevitably turn to entertainment for information: and the

entertainment media end up doing more sex education than perhaps their producers – or parents, teachers and academics – would like.

And particularly – as Ave Parsemain makes clear – for those of us growing up queer the entertainment media have consistently offered more varied and more positive representations of our sexuality and relationship possibilities than parents and schools have done. There was no homosexuality on the school curriculum in Scotland in the 1970s, nor in my mother's attempts to explain reproduction to me. But there were glimpses in the world of entertainment – the irreverent femininity of John Inman on the sitcom *Are You Being Served*, the camp grandeur of game show host Larry Grayson or the strange acceptance of gender confusion at the end of *Some Like it Hot*. This was perhaps not ideal sex education for a young gay man – but it was better than anything that formal education had to offer at the time.

As Ava suggests then, entertainment might do better – or certainly, more – teaching about what it means to be queer than parents or schools do. Even accepting that this is the case, though, there are challenges in thinking of entertainment as education. There remain difficulties in bringing these forms of culture together. It is true that there exists a recognised genre – 'entertainment education' – which uses entertainment modes for purposes of health promotion and social marketing. But even when the two terms are brought so resolutely together, there remains a tension. On the one hand, entertainment is 'audience-centred culture' (Collis, McKee & Hamley 2010, p. 921), commercial production that aims to give audiences what they will want. Entertainment producers thus have expertise in reaching audiences and providing them with content they want to consume. By contrast - and although the fundamental basis of education as the transmission of knowledge implies no particular relationship between the educator and the learner (and some traditions have actively tried to share power with students (Freire 2000[1970])) - it is generally the case that in Western cultures of formal learning, 'the understanding of classroom power that prevails for most people … focuses on the opposition between teachers and students' and 'assigns power to the teacher' (Manke 2009[1997], p. 1). Given these different orientations it is not surprising that there remains an 'intrinsic tension between

entertainment and education' (Bouman 2002, p. 238) – between 'truth' (the speech domain of educators) and 'communication' (the realm of entertainment producers). Buckingham and Bragg, speaking to young people about how they learned about sex, love and relationships from popular media, noted that they were likely to reject worthy programmes that they saw as 'preaching' to them (Buckingham and Bragg 2004 , 162). Indeed:

> .... the overt imposition of moral lessons .... is precisely [the] kind of approach that leads some viewers to perceive [entertainment] as preaching and lecturing and to reject them on these grounds. (Buckingham and Bragg 2004, 168)

Entertainment products such as soap operas don't preach to their audiences. Rather, they let young people work things out for themselves: they 'encourag[e] viewers to make their own judgments, rather than simply commanding their assent' (Buckingham and Bragg 2004 , 168). Herein lies the tension: the more that entertainment engages young people by letting them make up their own minds, the less likely it is to have a single clear didactic 'message' that all viewers will agree on. And conversely, the clearer the educational message, the less dramatic and engaging the entertainment is likely to be (Bouman [2004] 2007)(Singhal and Rogers 1999, 76). John Hartley, whose work on the *Uses of Television* is one of the most important contributions to thinking of the pedagogies of entertainment, notes that 'if TV is teaching, there needs to be some reformulation of the concept of teaching itself':

> Concepts of entertainment, citizenship, life-long and distance learning, and domesticity need to be brought to bear on the understanding of teaching itself. Teaching and learning need to be seen as non-purposeful activities of a society, not outcome-oriented institutional practices (Hartley 1999, pp. 45-46)

And what forms of education could better challenge a purposeful and institutional approach to pedagogy than queer sex education? It is at this point in the debate that Ava's book makes a fascinating intervention in our thinking about forms of culture and their relationships with their audiences. Taking the empirical approach that characterizes the Palgrave Entertainment Industries

book series, she shows that for both producers and consumers, the relationship between entertainment and education is less homogenous, more complex and contested, than previous writers (including myself) have suggested. Taking as its object of study the queer pedagogies of entertainment, Ava challenges what is meant by education – or by teaching – itself: 'While most of the existing scholarship focuses on questions of educational content, that is, *what* television teaches about sexual and gender identity, this book primarily explores its pedagogy, or *how* it teaches.'. When we study how entertainment teaches, what do we learn about the nature of teaching? In this book Ava shows how *Queer as Folk, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, Empire, The Prancing Elites Project, I Am Cait* and *Transparent* practice entertainment education – but not in the sense of trying to discipline entertainment to meet a traditional understanding of education. She is not interested in measuring the education of entertainment against a traditional model of teaching to see how well it measures up – taking such an approach, entertainment will always be found to be lacking, simply because it is not designed as a classroom tool. By contrast, in this book Ava writes about the ways in which entertainment's own aesthetic system can function pedagogically. She notes that 'Inviting empathy' can be a key pedagogical tool in queer sex education, that storytelling and emotions 'which are part of the entertainment experience, can help viewers learn about themselves and about the Other'. She notes that ambiguity need not be the opposite of pedagogy, but can represent an open, interactive form of teaching and learning. Each of the examples of queer entertainment she analyses 'invites active learning through reflection, discussion and debate ... invites viewers to judge, critique and discuss (and in some cases, to participate in the production through texting or online voting)'. And, in another important departure from institutionalised pedagogy, knowledge in television is changeable – as Ava notes, 'to take into account televisual seriality, it is crucial to study representations of queer characters in a given text across time'. The text itself changes as it moves through time: what better way to teach the mobility of queer sexualities than through a labile pedagogy?

One vital question raised by thinking of entertainment's education is that of expertise. Perhaps a key element of formal schooling is the institutionalising and

authorizing of knowledge. When there are issues where there are conflicting perspectives, those perspectives that are taught in schools are thereby validated as being worthwhile - correct, proper or truthful. How can such institutional forms of validation function in entertainment? Ava's case studies show that this question remains open for entertainment's education, which presents multiple points of view without insisting that the debate must be closed down and a single expertise validated. *I Am Cait*, for example, shows the perspective not only of Cait representing (one privileged example of) trans* life, but also the voices of those protestors who reject her authority to speak in their name. The pedagogy of this entertainment is not the learning of particular facts and positions; it is an invitation to debate and critically engage.

Ultimately, as Ava notes, in understanding the pedagogy of entertainment we have to accept that 'pleasure and learning are not incompatible'. And perhaps most importantly for the tradition of entertainment-education research, she demonstrates that this is neither (despite the concerns of tabloid newspaper journalists) a novel nor an unusual position among pedagogical researchers. The tradition of research on entertainment-education typically proceeds as though ambiguity and drama are problematic, that they get in the way of learning. Academics working in entertainment education have seen their role as 'to educate television personnel' (Breed & De Foe 1982, p. 98), to change the focus of the media workers from the production of entertainment to 'social benefit' (Breed & De Foe 1982, p. 90). When these researchers acknowledge the contribution made by the entertainment producers to entertainment education, it tends to be in the form of access to the institutions of entertainment production (Glik et al. 1998) rather than particular skills or insights. Even when researchers acknowledge that particular skills are necessary to produce successful entertainment – as when Kincaid notes that it in order to engage an audience it is necessary to 'create drama that involves the audience' (Kincaid 2002, p. 136) – this insight is attributed to 'theories of drama' – not to the entertainment producers who actually have the skills to do this (see also Moyer-Gusé, Chung & Jain 2011, p. 388). As Smith et al note 'most studies selected to focus on the "edu" in edutainment … Less attention has been paid to the "tainment" portion of edutainment' (Smith, Downs & Witte 2007, p. 134).

Despite the dominance of such pedagogical models in the tradition of entertainment-education research, Ava notes that among educational researchers more broadly this 'transmissive' approach to education (the one-way transmission of authorized facts) is not the only, nor the most important – and certainly not the most progressive – model of pedagogy. She notes that for a growing cohort of progressive pedagogical researchers in the constructivist model, teaching is seen as 'a process of working cooperatively with learners to help them change their understanding' (quoting Ramsden, 2003) – in fact, lecturing, preaching and hectoring are frowned upon both by entertainment consumers and progressive pedagogical scholars. For constructivist pedagogical researchers rote learning of facts is less interesting than supporting learners to reach their own critical positions. Education becomes more entertaining.

Ava's book discusses these issues – and in doing so, as I noted at the start of this foreword, I think it raises a large and fundamental question for researchers in communication, media studies and education: What would happen if we abandoned the whole "media effects" tradition and instead turned our attention to the study of entertainment's education? What if we stop asking, how was a consumer impacted by entertainment and instead asked what did she learn from it? We would have to confront the fact that what we call 'effects' are simply one kind of learning – that is, learning things that we don't approve of. Such an intellectual move would allow us to bring together decades of tradition on how people learn with media studies interests in the work of entertainment. We would stop thinking about audiences as somehow different from students; we would be open to the possibilities of all kinds of learning – good, neutral, bad … what some researchers think are good but other researchers think are bad …

A whole new way of thinking about and researching the relationship between entertainment and its audiences. It's an intriguing possibility. These big questions about how different forms of culture relate to their audiences bear continued study. Ava's book makes a vital contribution to this debate. I learned from it, and I was delighted by it. It taught me, and it made me smile. It is rigorous and engaging. I'm delighted to present it as the latest volume in the Palgrave Entertainment Industries series.

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