

LEN MASTERMAN

DATE OF INTERVIEW: NOV 3, 2010

INTERVIEWER: DEE MORGENTHALER

(QUOTE)

...Representation is the key concept of all the concepts, I think, because in media we're dealing with representational systems or a representational system, and therefore, the key questions there are the key questions in relation to questions of identity and race and culture and so on... What is being represented, how are my views being represented, who is representing and speaking for me, and which are the voices which never get represented? And you've got there the basic key questions for any of the most important areas of study, new areas of study, in the school and university curriculum....

It seemed to me that I had what first looked like, first of all, a reasonably coherent field to study, which is a sort of first requirement of any sort of discipline. You've got to be able to say what stands inside and outside of the field. Any discipline worth its salt has got to have a set of key questions and issues that it thinks are important. It has got to have some key ideas and key concepts...and it's got to have a particular and characteristic mode of inquiry...

BIOGRAPHY OF LEN MASTERMAN

Known as the originator of the idea of media representation and the Key Concepts of Media Literacy, Len Masterman started his career as a teacher. He became an international sensation with the 1980 publication of his book, "Teaching about Television," which sold out twice on its print run in the first six months of publication and ultimately sold 100,000 copies worldwide after five years of rejection by many publishers. His subsequent book, "Teaching the Media," applies the systematic framework he developed to media as a whole; this book was published in 1985. Masterman is now retired.

INTERVIEW TEXT

Selected Questions:

How did you become involved in the field or in the movement of media education...what inspired the beginning of your journey?

How old were your students?

And how did they receive your material?

DM: How did you become involved in the field or in the movement of media education...what inspired the beginning of your journey?

LM: Basically, I suppose there was no such thing as a media education movement when I started. Not only that, but it seemed improbable -- to me at any rate -- that there could ever be a possibility that something as heterogeneous as the mass media could be studied in a disciplined and rigorous way. That's because the whole notion of the mass media covers such a wide range of different practices that any idea that you could gather together -- the fields of film, advertising, radio, newspapers, magazines, and whatever else -- into a coherent field seemed unlikely.

There were, to be fair, *some* courses existing in schools and higher education on media studies, but they weren't really subjects in a traditional sense -- the school ones that I knew of -- and there were precious few of them (maybe one or two nationally). They would consist of an English teacher doing half a term on a bit of film, half a term on a bit of advertising, an occasional look at a newspaper or two, and that would be it.

But as for giving any thought to what connected these fields, the teachers weren't really getting very far with that. In fact, they weren't even asking the question. So the people who were doing it were really asking different questions of different media, and that meant that there wasn't really any such thing as "media studies" as a subject.

There was a branch of sociology which studied the media in terms of media effects and looked at the media in relation to different sets of social issues and so on, but that was really a branch of sociology.

And media was studied within English and English teaching (as an adjunct to literature) so that occasionally an English teacher might use a film as the basis for the kind of discussion that you would normally get through studying a book or a play.

And there's also been a strain of English teaching, which has been pretty hostile to the media, in which you would study advertising -- very much from the point of view of looking at the way in which you manipulated audiences and so on.

So what existed up until about the 1960s was a sort of study of the media that was split around the different subjects, but with no coherent approach that might justify the notion that this was a subject that was actually worth studying in its own right.

I started teaching as an English teacher in the early '60s, and I did a bit of media teaching. One of the earliest pioneers of using media within English teaching was a guy called F.R. Leavis, who was probably the foremost literary critic and academic of his day. He was a Cambridge don, and his background was to look at the media as a kind of disease. He introduced what is now generally known as the inoculation approach to media study.

That is, it sees media as an almost totally malign influence, and you need to give kids small doses of it in order to inoculate them against the infection, as it were. And his background was interesting, because it's not something that ever appeared in any of his published work, but during the First World War, he was an ambulance worker, stretcher bearer, and the kinds of things he must have seen on the battlefield from the First World War are beyond imagining, really.

During virtually all wars, of course, it is pretty widely known that there is an enormous amount of propaganda and censorship. I think that, in the First World War, the degree of censorship was

such that the people at home really didn't know first-hand many of the details of what was happening. So the support for the war never really wavered, and there was a great deal of censorship, and the people who were reporting it, of course, weren't inclined to write about things that might affect patriotism at home and the prosecution of the war, and so on.

So I think Leavis must have caught on to that. Although – as I said, it's all supposition, putting what I know about the man and his writing together -- I would say that probably that was a sort of traumatizing experience that made him want to encourage people to look critically and closely at the media.

He was somebody who was hostile to the media, but yet could see that it had a place in schools. And since he was an academic with such a formidable intellectual reputation, that gave quite a lot of impetus to English teachers to use media materials in a critical way in their classes.

His big book was one that he wrote in 1933 called "Culture and Environment." It was still in print in '63 when I started teaching. It'd gone through about 30-odd impressions. So it was a sort of handbook for teachers on how to use the media and how to analyze adverts and so on.

The other book, I suppose, that was around when I started was a book by Vance Packard called "The Hidden Persuaders." I don't know if you've ever come across that. It was really about the use of what he called "depth psychology" in the making of advertising and the influence of psychology within advertising.

And the idea there really came out of the use of psychological techniques by the American military. And when the Korean War ended, a lot of these people in psych (what we would now call PSYOPS) were turned back into civil society.

A lot of them found work on Madison Avenue and said, "Look. There are ways in which we can actually manipulate people." It was deliberately scary but actually the use of depth psychology in advertising was never that significant as Packard made out. It was a sensationalist sort of book. But it had a tremendous impact really at the time. It was a big seller on both sides of the Atlantic.

DM: *How old were your students?*

LM: When I started teaching I was teaching secondary school so that would be 11 to 18.

DM: *And how did they receive your material?*

LM: They loved it. As you probably know, anything from popular culture that gets into the classroom is well received. So it was always something that they liked a great deal. I suppose the big thing for me as an English teacher was moving on to work with kids who found print difficult who were not good readers. I was sort of forced to look at what you did as an English teacher which is essentially a print based subject...what you do with kids who equate print with failure and really don't want to have much to do with the written word.

So I started with students like that to use film quite a bit. And I was one of the first people, I think, to use film widely within the curriculum as an English teacher.

And I wrote quite a bit about that at the time. And just about that time film was starting to be used in the UK; in teacher training colleges where the future training teachers were being encouraged to work in film.

When I came out of a university culture where film was very important in the 1960s, late '50s early '60s, the sort of social realism film was starting to take off, producing work of major interest and importance. The French new wave film, European cinema was undergoing a major renaissance.

It just seemed, at the time, that some of the most significant and important ideas and aesthetic notions were coming out of film rather than out of the novel and the theater. So it was quite natural I think for teachers like me, who were just starting to use this kind of stuff in their lessons.

So that's basically how I started, as an English teacher who increasingly began to use media material. I suppose it is a similar trajectory to somebody like Barry Duncan who was also, I think, English based who found that the media material he used was pretty appealing and used more and more of it.

Then I got a job working in the education department of a university. One of the things I discovered in using film, particularly using foreign films, was that of course kids who had difficulty with reading, couldn't follow the subtitles.

I was using foreign films because the promise of visual medium was that they would get over the idea that print is a problem. But students couldn't follow the subtitles fast enough. That was a flop. It was a sort of massive failure on my part and sort of a major, major mistake. How stupid can you be?

So...I was talking about John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock and the major directors and treating them as kind of authors in the same way that you would a poet or a dramatist in literature.

But to the kids I was working with, they were as remote as, I don't know, Shakespeare, Shelly, Keats, Byron and so on. And so it just struck me then, particularly working with more challenging students, that it might make more sense to look critically at what their primary visual experience was; and that, of course, was through TV.

What's interesting is that film started to become respectable in education at precisely the point in history where cinemas were starting to close down. And film had less and less (or fewer and fewer) credentials to be considered a mass medium, anyway.

So television was something that people were watching 20 plus hours a week. Some of the kids I was teaching didn't have a cinema within close reach. So they never went to the cinema.

So I went on teaching film on the grounds that it was close to students' experience. It wasn't close to the experience at all. So, what's interesting is the sort of progress that I made in my own thinking was based on the failure of what I was doing.

And I was trying to think, I was getting closer and closer to what might connect with the kids. When it proved that film wasn't the answer, then I was driven to look at what was more relevant.

And that's what really led me into TV, and TV teaching. I think I mentioned that I did actually teach the first examined course in television studies.

We set that up in the early '70s when I started at the University in Nottingham. That gave me the time and the flexibility to go out into a school and teach a much more kind of experimental course than would have been possible if I had been a full time member of the teaching staff.

So I used to go out two afternoons a week to teach this course for a period of four years. The idea there was to just take a single medium and study that in a disciplined kind of way. What was challenging about that was the fact that I mentioned: the heterogeneous nature of the media.

Well that also applied to TV. It wasn't at all clear to me when I started. But television covers so many fields. It covers anything and everything you can imagine.

So you are studying television, but you could be studying football or music or a documentary of a news or an advert. It wasn't clear to me what you were studying, how could you encapsulate a field of study that was so diverse and so heterogeneous into a form of study that was focused and disciplined. In other words, TV forced me to think about what is the nature of what we are studying when we are studying. Is there a key to this that would draw these things together? I suppose the big step forward was to recognize that what we are actually studying here was television and not its subject contents. That is that we are studying, we weren't actually studying sport and music and news and documentary. We were studying representations of these things.

We were studying the ways in which these were being represented and symbolized and packaged by the medium. So that seemed a sort of major step forward. That what we were looking at was how television in particular, was trying to (and still does, and so does the press of course) present itself as being a window on the world. The analogy is with a transparent sheet of glass that you can look through. Ideally when you are looking at TV, you are actually looking through a window at reality. And what that denies is human agency, what it denies is the fact that these images are actually produced; they are selected and edited and packaged.

The seamlessness and reality of television is something that someone actually produced. In other words, what we are dealing with is a symbolic system. And that is true of news, and football and documentary film. So that thing to me came to be a fairly major step forward.

And from there it was possible to see, once you accept that what you are dealing with is a symbolic system, what you are dealing with is a construction, you take that as your focusing question. Then a whole set of satellite questions immediately present themselves.

For instance, if we are looking at representations then who is creating them, who is doing the representing? Who is telling us whose view is this of the world, who is telling us that this is the way the world is? Secondly what's the nature of the world that's being represented? What are its values? And that leads you straight into the questions of ideology.

And now that was important to me because it was one of the reasons I wanted to get into the whole thing about TV, apart from it being close to the experience of this student audience; it wouldn't have interested me if I hadn't been fairly convinced of the ideological role of the media in contemporary societies.

And there is long tradition of that. That carries on with the ideological view of the propaganda nature of the media. It carries on from the view of the Frankfurt School of Sociologists who, of course, were forced to get out of Frankfurt in the 1930s and to work in America once the Nazis got into power.

And they were particularly concerned with media study and with the importance and significance of the media because of the significance of propaganda within the development of fascism in Germany in the '30s.

So there is a strong tradition of looking at the impact of the media in mass societies, not only to encourage mass forms of production but also to encourage mass forms of thinking. The impacts of the media are of great ideological significance; that has been a strong impetus within the study of media. So that's the second sort of question, the ideological question.

Then there is the third kind of question: How are these representations made to be so seemingly authentic and true to life? How is it that we accept this as a kind of reality? And that leads you into the whole field of media language, and to learn how meaning is created?

And also the force of affective questions or questions of audience. How is the audience affected by these representations? How are they read and understood? Is it possible to read against the grain of these images, and so on?

So they were the sort of main areas of study. And pretty soon it seemed to me that I had what looked like, first of all, a reasonably coherent field to study, which is a sort of first requirement of any sort of discipline. You've got to be able to say what stands inside and outside of the field.

Any discipline worth its salt has got to have a set of key questions and issues that it thinks are important. It has got to have some key ideas and key concepts. They were already starting to form in my mind. And it's got to have a particular and characteristic mode of inquiry.

And that was something that I was talking about that developed in relation to studying the media. So you start off by actually looking at media texts, by looking at the literal meanings, the connotative meanings or what actually is being communicated here. What I was working on in early 1970 (1972-74) were things that are very familiar now: the constituents of the image. So what I was starting to get into was sort of really from the scratch, getting together the basics of what looked like a disciplined form of study. I started off by looking at constituents of the image, reading still images, reading moving images, looking at stuff that's now fairly commonplace like body language, like the way in which meaning is communicated through clothing and gesture, facial expression, and so on.

And so clarifying and making clear what the image was actually communicating at its simplest and most literal levels, then looking at connotative levels of meaning: what's being suggested here? Moving beyond the literal, reading between the lines of the image, what is it that's being presented? What's the point of view? What are the suggestions of those connotative, of those denotative levels that we've sketched out?

And then finally, can all of these connotations be pulled together to form a coherent sort of ideological position? And the idea there is that every image has a point of view, quite literally.

When you're watching television or film or looking at a photograph, there is a literal point of view. You know, where is the camera positioned? And that notion of a point of view...you can't have a view that's no view, as it were.

And the BBC's position is that it's sort of on Mount Olympus somewhere...

DM: Right. [laughs]

LM: ...or up in the heavens with this view that is no view. And the idea there is that the physical point of view is also an intellectual point of view. If you're covering, a piece of industrial action, like a strike or something like that, where you have the camera makes all the difference in the world. If the police forces are galloping towards you because you're in there amongst the strikers, that presents a very different image from the impression that you get if you're actually behind police lines and the strikers' missiles are being thrown directly at you.

Roland Barthes, a French writer, called ideology the final connotation of the connotations. That is, when you look at all of those suggestions of meanings, what does it all actually amount to? And that takes us into the field of ideology.

So when I wrote a book about that, "Teaching about Television," I had great difficulty in finding a publisher. Nobody was interested in it. Mainly because people would, quite rightly, say, "Well, who teaches about television?" So, well, I'm hoping it might take off.

[laughter]

LM: But who would buy it? Where's the market? I said, "Well, I was hoping to create one, really." But it was really, finally, sort of published by Macmillan as a favor. Somebody at the director level at Macmillan knew somebody at the Independent Television Authority who'd actually financed some of my research, and they published it as a sort of favor. They published it in 1980, I'd finished it in about 1975, so it took about five years to get it published.

DM: Wow.

LM: And what was amazing is that within about six months I was touring Australia... [laughter]

...giving lectures about it, going to Canada and heaven knows, and all over Europe and working for the Council of Europe and UNESCO. It sold out twice on its print run in the first six months. And I think it still might be in print, actually, but it sold about 100,000 copies. And all of those publishers who'd rejected it...

DM: [laughs]

LM: ...wrote back and said, "If you're ever thinking about writing anything else..." [laughter]

DM: Let us know.

LM: [laughs] And could you give us first refusal? So that was a kind of interesting experience, but what that opened out to me was, of course, the fact that if you could make a disciplined study

of TV, then maybe, actually, the basis of this framework might work for the media as a whole. And that led me on to write the book that in a way was easier to write, because it was based on quite a lot of thinking and work that I'd already done, and that was, "Teaching the Media." It came out in 1985.

LM: So we're up to [laughs] ...look, we're up to 1985. We've only got 30 years to go.

DM: Right. We're doing well. And, actually, you are answering all of my questions intuitively, so there you go...

LM: I'm giving you a sort of chronological account as far as I can remember it really.

DM: Absolutely. It's perfect.

LM: So, yes, it just seemed to me that maybe that kind of framework might be subject to one's own interpretations.

DM: Right.

LM: So I think David Buckingham, while critical of my work, was actually, without acknowledging it as with the BFI documents, taking on the conceptual approach that I'd developed while having severe reservations about what they thought was an approach that was a bit too ideological itself.

DM: Right. Almost talking about the same things but not realizing it [laughs].

LM: Well, what I'm trying to do is to point out that questions of ideology are central, which I would still argue, without saying that the teacher ought to encourage students to take up an ideological position.

DM: Right.

LM: It's about posing the question. It's about consciousness raising.

DM: Right.

LM: It's the same arguments with racism and feminism and I mean it's the same argument with humor. We did quite a bit of work on comedy. The last thing you can do is to say, "The jokes that you're laughing at aren't funny."

DM: Right [laughs].

LM: [laughs] I mean you can't actually say that, because if people find it funny, then it's funny. But what you can do is raise questions about it and problematize it and say, "Have you thought about this, and have you thought about that?" And they'll start to think about it, to muddy the water a little bit. It's to make them take things a little bit less for granted. That's what I take to be

consciousness raising -- raising to consciousness questions and issues that have been taken for granted.

And that's where I think ideology lies in the taken-for-granted nature of the world in which we live and our assumptions about it.

So I mean what was gratifying was, whenever I've done international conferences (I did a big international conference in Toronto in the year 2000 with representatives of some 75 countries, I think) to see people from countries that I didn't even know were countries saying, "Well, we do all the key concepts." Or somebody from India saying, "Oh, yeah, we've got a good network in India, and we're all using the key concepts," you know?

DM: Right.

LM: It's just fantastic.

DM: Right.

LM: That's just fantastic.

DM: That is. That's amazing.

LM: And I think that's the way in which, generally, the subject is now approached even with emulation to the new technologies. The key and critical questions remain the same. Where is this stuff coming from? Whose interests are being served by it? How reliable is it? How can we read it? How are we intended to read it? Can you read against it? What are the values implicit in it? And what's the ideological position that's being underpinned?

And I mean the most important ideological step of all, I think, is taken when you just actually ask the questions. That is, as soon as you crack the taken-for-granted realism of the Internet or of the TV, as soon as you say, "This isn't reality, but a representation of it," then you've made the most profound ideological step of all.

You're saying that what I previously took to be an item, an article of faith, or part of the laws of nature, are actually *representations*. They're constructs. And therefore this impinges on major questions of culture and identity and race, because issues of representation are absolutely central to that.

And representation is the key concept of all the concepts, I think, because in media we're dealing with representational systems or a representational system, and therefore, the key questions there are the key questions in relation to questions of identity and race and culture, and so on.

What is being represented, how are my views being represented, who is representing and speaking for me, and which are the voices which never get represented? And you've got there the basic [laughs] key questions for any of the most important areas of study, new areas of study, in the school and university curriculum.

DM: Right.

LM: And they'll all actually then come back to media, because that is the most important symbolic representational system in our conscience.