Children, gender and video games: towards a relational approach to multimedia, by Valerie Walkerdine

Susanne Gannon[a]

[a] School of Education, University of Western Sydney, Penrith Sth DC, NSW, Australia

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Children, gender and video games: towards a relational approach to multimedia, by Valerie Walkerdine, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, vi + 235 pp., £45.00 (hardback), ISBN 023051717X

In *Children, Gender and Video Games* Valerie Walkerdine again demonstrates the close empirical work and theoretical elegance that made her earlier work important for scholars of gender and education. The book is timely both in terms of its content and its theoretical moves. It emerges from an ethnographic study of 24 girls and 24 boys aged from 8 to 11 in an after-school videogame club, through which Walkerdine examines issues including the construction of masculine and feminine subjectivities, the nature of learning, media violence and the flow of global capital and labour in the computer games industry. The most significant feature of the book is its theoretical contribution. Whilst acknowledging the difficulties inherent in attempting to think differently through her data, to bring forward what is more often occluded, she sketches out the beginnings of what she calls a 'relational approach' not only to children's engagements with multimedia but to subjectification more broadly. It signals the possibilities for educational research of what has been deemed the 'affective turn'.

Walkerdine traces a threefold theory of affect incorporating the dimensions of sensation, ideation and unconscious fantasy. This formulation enables her to overleap binaries such as rational/irrational, mind/body, external/internal and move beyond the limits she sees in the abstractions and linguistic bias of Foucauldian discourse analysis. The theoretical assemblage that this book foreshadows enables Walkerdine to bring her previous work in critical psychology, psychoanalysis and poststructural theory into productive engagement, for example, with Latour's actor network theory, Deleuzean approaches to affects, Haraway's notion of figuration, and Ricouer's work on memory and narrative. She promises that the nuances of this 'big toolkit' (p. 148) will be the focus of her next book, however, it is already evident in this one that powerful new meanings are able to be made from the empirical data gathered in the videogame project.

Being or becoming a certain kind of subject becomes not a discursively determined position so much as a constantly shifting accomplishment within a network of flows and relationalities. Particular children in the study are understood as 'nodal points at the intersection of the complex practices which produce them' (p. 140). Timothy, for example, is produced as a competent game-playing subject at the intersection of his parents' views of boys, the action masculinity coded into videogame design, the disavowals of other players during multiplayer games and the controls themselves, which also act in this scene to mobilise and produce the Timothy who manipulates them with such apparent skill. Rather than seeing relational work as 'noise' in empirical research, this approach draws attention to the constant and precarious project of assembling a subject. Timothy becomes 'an embodied temporality … also mapped out spatially and interrelationally' (p. 180). The 'competent player' becomes simultaneously 'a position, an assemblage, a figure, a fantasy, a who, which is lived and created through the flows of a number of discourses and practices … an aspiration … an always elusive fiction' (pp. 206–7).

Walkerdine demonstrates throughout the book that relationalities are profoundly gendered. In her discussion of girls' generally less competent game play, Walkerdine turns from explanations reliant on game content and design towards explanations tracing the complexities of femininity. Detailed observations of children interacting in multiplayer games and interviews with parents support her contention that games can be understood as sites for the performance of well-rehearsed, well-regulated femininities and masculinities. In particular, girls are ambivalently positioned in game playing. They must simultaneously

be competitive and co-operative; their desire to win must be masked in order to maintain an appropriate femininity. Although competence in games increases boys' status amongst other boys, for girls it mitigates against their friendships with other girls. Parental regulations tend to be gender-inflected with games as part of the project of masculinity; boys playing games are encouraged to achieve success and curb aggression, whilst girls are subtly regulated (and self-regulate) against game playing. Through the case of the aptly named Prudence, Walkerdine demonstrates how this particular girl game-player is produced within an elaborate assemblage of regulatory practices encompassing middle-class tastes, dispositions and femininities.

Limitations are those inherent in studies of new media. The games that are mentioned now seem somewhat quaint and important cultural shifts, such as online social networking, are not discussed. However, Walkerdine's claim that the book offers a productive new analytical frame for understanding human subjectification encompassing relationality, embodiment, affectivity and discourse is well justified. Although its initial appeal will be for researchers in multimedia and children's cultures, it offers far more than this to other readers interested in contemporary theories of subjectification.

Susanne Gannon
School of Education
University of Western Sydney
Penrith Sth DC, NSW, Australia
s.gannon@uws.edu.au

Identity, diversity and teaching for social justice, by Juliet Perumal, Bern, Peter Lang, 2007, 392 pp., US$68.95, 63.10, £40.20 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-03910-872-5

Whilst the theory and applications of feminist pedagogies have long been a staple of academia its applications to language teaching have been sadly neglected. Feminist pedagogy, as we all know, has been largely confined to Western academia. It can only be enlivened when it comes in contact with those for whom it was never meant. At least this is what I found in my research with Southern Sudanese Nuer women who settled in Australia and struggled to learn English. Exciting developments exist for both language teaching and feminist pedagogies in such a teaching and learning environment. It was thus with great pleasure and anticipation that I received Juliet Perumal's narrative study of five South African language teachers attempting to implement feminist pedagogies in their university classes.

Perumal's book is a worthy contribution to the fields of feminist pedagogies and language teaching and not merely because it is unique in its combination of the two. Perumal's study is largely based on the autobiographical writings of her five research subjects (she also conducted classroom observations). Thus she makes a fine contribution to narrative research. One regret I have is that her methodology was not more radical still. Her five subjects are intelligent, articulate university lecturers who have thought deeply about their feminist teaching. Perumal might have conceived of a methodology which involved her subjects beyond the submission of their autobiographies. However, Perumal's work does not suffer from the conventional narrative research techniques and analysis it depends upon and this is simply an observation that her work promises an exciting direction.