AN OPEN LETTER TO LEN MASTERMAN
From Cary Bazalgette (2001)

Dear Len,

I am sorry to see that my paper "Sabretooth Tigers and Polar Bears", presented
to the AMES Conference in Scotland in 1999, has offended you so much that you
feel obliged to produce a 106-page booklet, "Down Cemetery Road", not only to
refute what it says but also to mount a general attack on the educational activity
of the BFI over the last 15 years. It is to this last area that I must respond
promptly, since it contains a number of serious errors, not only of fact but also of
contextual understanding. Whether your assessment of my own work as flimsy
and contradictory is just or not, I leave to others to comment, at least for now. I
simply do not have the time to give all of your arguments the attention they
deserve. For the same reason, this response must take the form of an open letter
rather than a formal paper.

Perhaps a useful place to start is this sentence from my AMES conference
paper:

> "If the media education movement has been of value – and
> don't get me wrong, I think it has been of enormous value –
> then we have to decide what it is that we take from the
> media education project that we believe to be of value and
> actually get it into our education systems as a basic
> entitlement – not an option, not an extra, but something
> everyone has a right to learn."

This is part of what you claim "was clearly meant to be a terminally wounding
attack" (p13). It encapsulates the crucial principles that have driven the way I
have tried to shape educational policy at the BFI: that what really matters in
media education is how we establish it as a right for everyone, not only for a few;
and that educators' first responsibility is to learners, not only to their teachers.

I think the fundamental difference between us is that your starting-point tends to
be the needs and interests of specialist media teachers, while mine is the needs
and interests of learners, whether specialist or not. Another key difference is that
you are an academic and I am a bureaucrat: you must be concerned with the
constitution of the subject area, marking and defending its boundaries, while I
have to deal with what can actually be achieved in the real world of statutory
requirements and changing budgets. Both of these are important tasks, but they
are potentially in conflict.

It is understandable, then, that you will seek evidence of compromise on the core
principles of the subject, and that I will seek evidence of failure to recognise the

realities of practice. It is not surprising that you accuse me of neglecting the needs of a sector that you see as of central importance; I am then bound to respond that, although this sector is extremely important – and the BFI serves it much better than you think we do – it does only teach about 2% of the school and college population, whereas the BFI's responsibility is not only to the 9 million learners attending mandatory schooling in the UK, but also to the further, higher and continuing education sectors as well.

My first concern is with your sources for what your back cover blurb terms "A damning indictment of the educational policies and strategies of the British Film Institute" and the late Dr Hart calls "the first scholarly and authoritative historical account of changing policies on education at the BFI" (also on the back cover).

On page 10 of "Down Cemetery Road" you protest your helplessness in the face of what you later (p 92) describe as "decisions and policies which are made behind closed doors". Anticipating this characterisation of a sinister and secretive BFI, you plead that "I have no way of knowing the validity of my assumption that the views expressed in Cary Bazalgette's recent papers represent the settled and considered position of the BFI". Since a simple phone call to me on my direct line, 020 9757 8973, would have settled these questions at once, I am at a loss to understand why you did not do this. I'd have been very happy to explain that when I give presentations at conferences I do it as an individual, that I am usually invited because organisers think I won't churn out a "party line" but may say some new and thought-provoking things, and that I do not submit my texts to my bosses for approval. By basing most of your arguments on this rather ephemeral sort of text you have missed your chance to address those that do represent "settled and considered" positions.

You could for example have accessed www.BFI.org.uk/education and downloaded our Education Strategy, which has been formally endorsed by the BFI Governors. There you would have found the following: "We believe that people should have opportunities to extend their knowledge of these [the moving image] media, to develop a critical understanding of how their meanings are made and circulated, and to experience the pleasure of creating their own messages in moving images and sounds" (my emphasis – close enough, I would have thought, to the "democratic, critical and relevant" criteria you cite on p46). If you had objections to that statement, or to anything else in the 16 pages of detail that surround it, you could have made them known to the Director, to the BFI's Education Committee, to the Chair of Governors, to the Film Council, or to the DCMS. The BFI is a public body, accountable to taxpayers like you. It can be, should be and is open to criticism. If a BFI staff member such as myself is thought to have made public statements as damaging and destructive as you deem mine to have been, then a specific complaint on those grounds should be made. Why didn't you do any of this?

Much of your polemic is, understandably, focused on my notion that by refocusing advocacy for media education on the moving image media, more headway can be made with policymakers than by continuing to insist that all media education must address all media. I do know that the previous sentence is yet another reformulation of that position, and I apologise for not making it clear enough in 1999. But it is and continues to be no more than a continuing emphasis in our advocacy, not a dramatic change of policy. For example, we argued – successfully – for "moving image media" to be specifically mentioned in the media requirements in Curriculum 2000. Nothing was thereby excluded; we did this because we knew that English teachers were tending to avoid the study of moving image media in their own right.

You state that media education "is based upon a literally irresistible set of arguments for considering and teaching about the media as a whole" (p73). Both you and I have argued for this, and that the arguments are good ones in theory. Let's look at the practice, though. First of all, your first and most influential book was *Teaching about Television*. Teachers around the world have taken up its ideas, and in many places "media education" effectively means "television education". Secondly, many published resources – particularly the free material from Film Education – privilege and facilitate teaching about the moving image media. Neither of these influences has anything to do with the BFI, but they have set a powerful agenda for practice. Margaret Hubbard, one of my most vociferous critics in the AMES pamphlet produced some 18 months after I gave my presentation, protests the importance of studying the media as a whole. But in her own presentation to the BFI/TES Commission of Inquiry into English in 1993, her vivid and persuasive account of what media education practice really looks like makes one passing reference to press and one to book covers: everything else she describes is film- or television-based (see Bazalgette (ed), *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into English: Balancing Literature, Language and Media in the National Curriculum*, BFI 1994, pp85-112). No one has challenged this presentation, then or since, on the grounds of its being not "proper" media education. My argument, then, is that whatever the theory, the notion of focusing arguments for media education on the moving image merely reflects much existing practice.

You speculate extensively on whether a focus on moving image is the result of "narrow" and "self-serving" institutional interests on the part of the BFI, a policy imposition forced by the BFI's funding bodies, or a plan that I foisted upon the members of the Film Education Working Group (p41). This is where your arguments particularly lack the contextual and institutional information that I would have been very glad to provide had you asked me, and which would have helped you mount a more forceful and focused critique.

The BFI's remit from Government is and has always been the moving image (including television from 1960; not, as you state, the 1980s). This has meant that it has always had to negotiate between the "narrowness" of that remit and

what would seem more logical or user-friendly in the world at large. Most cultural institutions have this sort of problem. How much sense does it make to separate the National Film and Television Archive from the National Sound Archive, for example? Why does the BBFC serve the film industry in one of its classification roles and the Home Office in another? But if your argument is that the BFI has simply tried to preserve its own continued existence by betraying and abandoning those who continue to teach Media Studies as traditionally defined, then that is simply not true. Our teacher training courses support a model of media education that is traditional in many ways. Our Media Studies Conferences in July and October include workshops on press, radio and multimedia. Our new textbook, Media and Meaning, includes chapters on computer-based media, radio, newspapers and magazines as well as on film and television. Yes, we did advocate and support an "all-in" version of media education in the 1980s and yes, recently we have stuck closer to moving image work. The reason is that since the National Curriculum was first proposed in the late 1980s, more of our work has focused on the problems of the mandatory sector, where the issues are very different. I will come back to this later.

The BFI's remit to convene the Film Education Working Group was, as you rightly say (p16) initially driven by economic motives. That remit in turn had to be negotiated with the various interests pushing for membership of the Group, and then with the Group itself. Some of them – Richard Collins in particular – made valiant efforts to negotiate a stronger emphasis on television. These are reflected in the Report's use of the term "moving image" rather than "film" and in the way that "moving image" is defined in the Introduction: as a language carried in many media. It's also significant that the remit came from the division of the DCMS that dealt with film, not the one that dealt with television. In this context, the BFI's role of convenor and secretariat had to be to negotiate the best possible outcome for education about the moving image media across several different agendas. There are bound to be differences of opinion about how well we achieved this.

You took the trouble to ring "some" members of the Group (how many of the 25, in the 15 minutes you say it took? And on what basis did you select them?), to note their "amused chortles" about my "dominant role" but not whether they disagreed with the content of the Report, or were prevented from contributing to it themselves. You did not, however, ring me. So who was the author of *Making Movies Matter*? Of course I drafted most of it: that's what the secretary is for! But that is not the same as saying I'm the author. My drafts were scrutinised, debated and in many places rewritten by many members of the Group. Nothing went through that wasn't read and accepted by the Group. "Authorship" is a legally definable term, which does not, in my view, apply to my role in this process. It was on this basis that I challenged Des Murphy's public identification of me as "one of the main authors" and, more importantly, the notion that the Report "sets out the BFI's strategy for education". The fact that the BFI's Governors later endorsed it does not mean that our entire educational strategy is contained within it. You can easily see the difference if you read the actual Strategy.

You state that "within the BFI itself, television has consistently been treated as a Cinderella medium, of considerably less cultural importance and aesthetic interest than film" (p91). I agree that television does not yet have the prominence in BFI discussions and activities that many of my colleagues and I would like. But consider what the BFI does undertake. We ran several summer schools on television, set up a Commission of Inquiry on the BBC, and ran two major research projects, the Industry and Audience Tracking Studies. We programme archive television at the NFT and elsewhere; we have recently published the *Television Genre Book,* the *Global Media Atlas, British Television Drama* and numerous other titles. We have published resource packs on title sequences, situation comedy, and police series, and we have now commissioned a new series of resources on television for secondary schools. We run education events on aspects of television such as documentary, game shows and comedy. The National Film and Television Archive's holdings are 50% television, which increase daily because it tapes all terrestrial broadcasts, and our NOF-funded screenonline project will start to make much of this material accessible to educational institutions. I wonder whether you are aware of all this? It's all on our website and in the materials that we send out, but perhaps we are still not marketing ourselves effectively enough.

Your unfavourable comparison of the BFI's work with that of Film Education (p90) is odd, given your usually stringent analysis of the media industries and their motivations. How is it that they are able to provide free resources to schools? It is of course that the major film distributors see this as an advantageous way to market their products. You berate the BFI for failing to ensure that media teachers get pupils to understand the role of the media as "consciousness industries" and insist that all of Film Education's materials are "organised around media education's key concepts", but you won't find much in their materials that deals critically with the ideological projects of Fox, Disney or Warner Brothers. I am surprised that you don't take issue with them on this; however, I don't. I would say that it is precisely Film Education's skilful tailoring of their free resources to mainstream curriculum content, that is the secret of their success. It's extremely difficult to get across the more knotty media education concepts in a single sheet poster or an 8-page booklet and it would be foolish of them to try. As you no doubt know, we now provide part of Film Education's core funding, and are working on ways to ensure that our activities are more clearly complementary. This includes debate with them about what moving image education should be about and how best to teach it. For example, Ian Wall and I have collaborated in drafting a Moving Image Arts specification at AS Level for CCEA in Northern Ireland. Media teachers and Art teachers alike are keen to pilot it, and it has been a pleasure to work with someone like Ian who shares my enthusiasm for the "focus on moving image" scenario.

Perhaps your most serious accusation is that "the recent history of media education has been characterised by a series of quite catastrophic policy blunders, some of which can be laid directly at the door of the BFI" (p22) Despite your admission that it would be "foolish and unfair to use the BFI as a scapegoat for all of the difficulties visited upon media education over the past fifteen years" (p33), your catalogue of "blunders" is so extensive that it is hard to avoid the conclusion that you think the BFI has had a worse effect on media education than 15 years of Tory education policies. Let me try and address your "authoritative historical account".

You say that in 1987 the BFI advocated a cross-curricular approach to media education in the new National Curriculum. No, it did not. The then Head of BFI Education, Philip Simpson, met with the secretary of state, Kenneth Clarke, who assured him that there was absolutely no chance whatsoever of introducing another subject to the ten then proposed for the National Curriculum. Philip agreed with all the department's staff that the best move in the circumstances would be to advocate a place for media education within English. We all agreed that arguing for a cross-curricular place for media education would only lead to marginalisation. Many English teachers strongly agreed with this. Almost all media teaching at the 5-16 age ranges was (and still is) done by English teachers.

You say that "this was widely seen as a betrayal by hundreds of Media teachers who were left high and dry to fend for themselves" (p23). But at that stage (unlike later) there was no policy threat to Media Studies. The focus was on the mandatory curriculum, not on optional courses. As a specialist subject, Media Studies has continued to grow since then, and its teachers continued to be assisted by the BFI through training, events and resources. Our Easter Schools were primarily for media teachers, and the 70-hour BFI/OU distance learning course, *Media Education: An Introduction* threw a lifeline to many Media Studies teachers struggling without advisory support or INSET funding.

What the BFI did do in 1989 and 1991 was to publish the Primary and Secondary Curriculum Statements, which did contain suggestions for widening the scope of media teaching from its base in English. Unlike the advice we provided – at their request – to Professor Cox's English Working Group, this was not trying to intervene in policy, but to make the best of the unsatisfactory situation the policy was bound to create, whatever the efforts of small advocates like the BFI. So the cross-curricular advice to teachers followed after the policy advice to the DFEE for location within English, rather than preceding it as you state on p25. Of course we knew that experienced media teachers could have a very positive effect on overall achievement in schools: this was confirmed by the study of 13 primary and secondary schools we commissioned from James Learmonth and Mollie Sayer in 1995 (*A Review of Good Practice in Media Education*, BFI 1996) as well as by the late Andrew Hart's study in 1998-9. But as I have said at the beginning of this letter, our aim has been to reach far wider than the few schools

where Media Studies was then established. There was and is much excellent media teaching going on in English Departments, and in other subject such as Art, History, PSHE; there is also some wonderful work in primary schools. These people would not welcome your idea that it is only specialist Media Studies teachers who can properly support the development of media teaching across the curriculum!

Both *Media Education: An Introduction* and the Primary and Secondary Media Education Curriculum Statements were based on what you call "a third major policy error", our six-part "Key Aspects" framework for studying the media. The BFI's error lies, according to you, in its "major omission" of any reference to the concept of ideology. I am puzzled by this, because the explanatory "key aspects" grid – widely adopted in many other countries as well as the UK – begins with

> MEDIA AGENCIES – who produces a text; the different
> stages and processes of production; media institutions;
> economics and ideology; intentions and results.
> (BFI, *Primary Curriculum Statement*, 1989, p00)

Your account of the BFI's efforts to retain the place of media study within English sees this as a fatally compromised enterprise, but in our view it was the only possible option at the time. Far from being "complicit" with Thatcherism, it meant challenging the Thatcher Government in its most sacred shrine of British traditions: the English curriculum. On pp 28-29 you recall the political atmosphere of the time, exemplified by ministers Patten and Blatch; there was also John Major's party conference declaration that "there'll be no GCSE's in *Eldorado*!" But your text skips seamlessly from 1992 to 1995, eager to condemn the BFI's tiny success in helping to scrape minute references to media back into the 1995 English curriculum. What you seem to forget is that in 1992/3 the Government was poised to remove any references to media from the curriculum and to abolish GCSE Media Studies into the bargain. Our strategy at this dark and dangerous moment was to hold a two-day "Commission of Inquiry" into English with an impeccably middle-of-the-road panel of judges and a politically wide-ranging collection of witnesses – from Stuart Hall to Roger Scruton. The Government could easily have isolated and demolished any self-righteous group of media teachers pleading their own case. It was far harder for them to dismiss the views of people such as Mary Warnock, Elspeth Howe of the Broadcasting Standards Commission, and of one of its own educational consultants, Robin Alexander. The views were mild, but politically significant: "It appears from the evidence that the idea of learning about the media as a general entitlement is now a widely-accepted principle, which we would endorse." (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, op cit, p16). To dismiss this as "complicit" is, I think, to disregard the enormous danger the whole movement was in at that point.

You castigate your next target, *Moving Images in the Classroom*, as "endors[ing] approaches that were not even seen as progressive when they were last in

vogue in the 1950s" (p30), namely, the use of film versions of literary works. But you must surely be aware that watching film or TV adaptations of plays or novels is still by far the most dominant use of moving image media in English (A.J.B. Barratt, *Audit of Media in English*, BFI 1998, table 3.6, p24). I cannot see why it would not be "progressive" to try and encourage teachers to do this better. The guide does address eight other subject areas as well as English (although you do not mention this)and was produced through a process of consultation and collaboration, which is described on its second page.

Moving Images in the Classroom is our latest effort to present an account of "the place which film (and television) should have in the modern curriculum" (your p83); you find it unsatisfactory, but it has been received with enormous enthusiasm by teachers, advisers, subject associations, educational lead bodies such as the TTA, TCT and GTC, and by the Secretary of State. The QCA has funded a second reprint, and over 7000 copies have been distributed so far. There are 1000 downloads a month of all or part of it as a free pdf from www.BFI.org.uk/education), and 94% of the users whom we have asked about its value said they found it useful and accessible. The editorial team of internal and external people who produced it is reasonably satisfied with it. We think we have achieved a good integration of what you (and we) call the essential principles of media education in ways that are accessible to non-specialists. For example, in English we suggest that pupils collect and analyse media representations of particular groups in order to develop their understanding that "the origins, purpose and intended audience of a text can affect what it can say and what its ideological or moral message may be" (p17). In Citizenship we propose that pupils write "to a commissioning editor or production company to criticise coverage of an event or issue and to suggest ways in which it could have been done differently" (p32). I would like to hear how you think these quotations bear out your argument that "the BFI's approach to studying the media was now one which could equally well be applied to wallpaper" (p33).

You also attack the learning progression model, "Becoming Cineliterate", adapted for *Moving Images in the Classroom* with slight alterations from that published in *Making Movies Matter*. You call it "a rushed, opportunistic piece of work". Early in the work of the Film Education Working Group, Mary Fowler and I met with senior staff in Ofsted who advised us in no uncertain terms that we could not afford to wait until "a serious educational model…based on extended classroom work or research" (your p43) could be developed. Other curriculum developers such as Bernard Crick's Citizenship Group were certainly not "remain[ing] discreetly silent until a field-tested proposal [could] be made" (your p44) but going right ahead with curricular models, directly endorsed by David Blunkett. In order to get a foothold in the policy agenda – which these Ofsted staff, unlike Chris Woodhead, were keen to encourage! – they said it would be essential for us to do the same. So there was a sense in which the model was opportunistic, and I find your attempt to belittle our frank admission of this, "the BFI actually agrees with this assessment" somewhat unconvincing.

You also seem to think that this model somehow replaces a pre-existing model of media teaching and learning that was much better. But the whole point here is that there has never been a model of learning progression in media education, certainly not one that might be used from Key Stage 1 upwards: and there couldn't be one that is empirically-based, because there is no extant classroom work that shows continuity of learning across those stages. Any model has to be hypothetical at the moment: just a basis for discussion. We will be bringing together the schools and teachers who are interested in developing the model, to have that discussion. You bemoan the absence of "major concepts" and "rationales" in the model, despite the presence on page 57 of a "Rationale" containing what most media teachers would regard as quite familiar conceptual areas: Language, Producers and Audiences, Messages and Values. You also object to the model's provision of "key words", because you say that teachers will just teach to them (p31). This seems a bit of a lapse from your usual respect for teachers' intelligence, as well as simply denying our warning that this is not the purpose of these lists. I remember discussing the "key words" idea with one of our advisers, Professor Dylan Wiliam of King's College, London, who I think may actually have suggested it in the first place. He argued the usefulness of key words to provide, as he put it, a "calibration" that could give teachers more concrete clues as to what you'd be dealing with at each stage. There has been debate about whether this is true. We're looking at this in teachers' responses and will be reflecting upon it as we develop the model with schools.

There is much more in "Down Cemetery Road" that demands response, but my priority here has been to correct your more corrosive allegations about the institution for which I work. I do have a more general concern: that the extremity of some of your language, the narrowness of your range of sources and the selectiveness with which you have used them, betray a deeper motivation to attack the BFI – and me personally – at the cost of damaging your own scholarship and objectivity. It would be regrettable if that were the case. Constructive criticism is always welcome: prejudice and tendentiousness are not.

Whatever my own and the BFI's shortcomings may be – and I am sure they are many – what is to be gained by pitting groups of teachers against us? Our "leadership", such as it is, has been ascribed rather than assumed: our aim is to be a centre of excellence but not a bastion of authoritarianism. We would be delighted if an effective subject association could be formed. We already provide funding to www.mediaed.org (where extracts from "Down Cemetery Road" were first published) to help ensure that the independent voices of media teachers can be heard. If those voices wish to criticise the BFI, or indeed you, from that platform or any other, they can and will.

With best wishes,

Cary Bazalgette