
Manuel Alvarado's Thought

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Given the doubts I feel about the extent to which one can call children's culture their own I wish to argue that teachers are responsible not only for extending children's view of the world but also with challenging their perception of it.

Manuel Alvarado (1977,)

[T]elevision . . . is both an industry and a set of state institutions . . . whose purpose is to present itself, to expose itself continuously and conspicuously as no other set of institutions does, and yet which constantly effaces its own practices and methods

Manuel Alvarado (1983,)

This article tries to give readers a sense of Manuel Alvarado as a writer. Exercises in exegesis are frequently boring to undertake and excruciating to read. I've sought to avoid being boring—one of Manuel's most loaded denunciatory terms.

Of course, in addition to being boring, authorial study is contentious. This is especially true when many hands are involved. Rather than ask his many coauthors who wrote what, I've looked at aspects of his work, produced with others or alone, that say something about what mattered to him as an intellectual, beyond the banality of the page.

What a body of work it is! There are scholarly articles, academic books, children's books, edited collections—the full gamut, covering video, TV, cinema, media education, authorship, documentary, food, drink, Latin America, drama, and so on—a restless, inquiring imagination at play.¹

I had already read some of the pieces I consulted, but others were new to me. After Manuel died, I obtained copies, *inter alia*, of his three books for young readers, on

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Mexican cuisine, the history of TV and video, and Spain (Alvarado 1988b, 1989, 1990). These volumes, engagingly written and lavishly illustrated, encapsulate many of his principal concerns, such as his love of the countries and topics concerned. They transcend the *nostra* of most children's literature to examine pleasure alongside inequality—the material on cuisine explains how Mexican food production and consumption are structured in dominance.

For the purposes of this article, however, I have focused, selectively, on Manuel's academic writings about pedagogy and the media to extract the core of his thought: passionately held, powerfully expressed views that persist as records of a very particular form of media pedagogy and research. It is a different agenda from the dominant ones today because it is thematically internationalist, politically socialist, methodologically promiscuous, and dedicated to teaching school pupils as much as university students.

In the twenty years of our friendship, I rarely raised such matters with him. Unlike many contributors to this special issue, although our interests overlapped, I didn't really have a professional relationship with Manuel, other than through the usual interactions that take place between publishers and academics at conferences, and I sought his advice when I was starting this journal. But the gifts he gave me, for instance, were books about agitprop art and how to debunk shoddy thinking, a watch that I needed and he no longer did, and a chair emblazoned with Catalan slogans.

When I looked at his work for this exercise, I was also seeking moments when I could imagine him speaking to me, much as when he was recommending a cuisine, a city, a bar, a book, a country, a person, or a transportation route. If you want to hear that voice and see him speak, you can consult the short video at [youtube.com/watch?v=fB8pKHvvBNI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fB8pKHvvBNI), recorded to explain how he blended publishing and academia.

Manuel's agenda was equally influenced by Marx, Althusser, Gramsci, Foucault, and the Global South; and it was set by someone who was no careerist. His legacy is not the outcome of climbing a ladder toward formal recognition in scholarly journals, granting bodies, professional associations, and university departments—a trajectory that generally produces “normal science.”

Instead, Manuel was part of a formation, alongside his fellow *soixante-huitards*, that gained control of various apparatuses as an extraparliamentary political project. He was fond of the German socialist rallying cry, “The long march of the institutions,” a devolved but carefully calculated takeover of cultural bodies.² For despite their love of anarchic spectacle, smart *soixante-huitards* rejected the civil-society mythology of volunteerism so beloved of anti-Marxist intellectuals in the United States and its client states and organizations. Manuel did not share the reformism of the mid-twentieth-century British Labour politicians Nye Bevan and Richard Crossman, but like them he loathed puerile romantic attachments to a “patch-quilt of local paternalisms . . . an odious expression of social oligarchy and churchy bourgeois attitudes” (Bevan and Crossman, quoted in *Economist* 2005). Some might regard his later work as a governor of Sir John Cass's Foundation and chair of its grants committee as part of this very tendency.

Think again, please. His project there was to expand the charity's definitions of youth and class and defang its antiseccular overlords.

Manuel's 1970s and '80s heritage sustained him through triumphs and dips. His coauthored reflection on editing the massively influential *Screen Education* makes the point well. Written a decade after the journal's demise, the essay testifies to what animated him more generally:

The intention was to investigate the discourse of both writing about the cinema and teaching about it, to uncover the relationship within each between theory and practice, and to relate this to the wider concerns of a progressive or radical politics. (Alvarado, Buscombe, and Collins 1993,)

For these activist intellectuals, "theory was never justified for its own sake," but to produce "knowledge, since knowledge, unlike taste, was verifiable and transferable" (Alvarado, Buscombe, and Collins 1993,). Manuel's use of critical media theory obeyed neither Frankfurt nor France and opposed a "yea-saying attitude . . . [c]elebratory" orientation toward new forms of communication. The revelation that "popular culture [is] wonderful! It's so *complicated*" (Alvarado and Thompson 1990a, 1990b,) didn't impress him, nor did the vaguely formulated assumption of a postmarket utopia (which once underpinned media and cultural studies).

Manuel was disturbed but hardly surprised that this receded with the decline of state socialism and the emergence of the "Washington Consensus." The noted playwright David Edgar has mused pointedly on the neoliberal drift of culturalists since that time:

[I]t is one of the great ironies of the project to challenge cultural paternalism and celebrate audience diversity that by undermining one bit of the ruling class, it appeared to endorse the ambitions of another. Thus did post-Marxist academia give a progressive seal of approval to letting the multicultural market rip; . . . if the ultimate socialist institution is the post office, then postmodernism and post-structuralism have persuaded post-socialists to abandon playing post offices and take up playing shop. (Edgar 2000,)

This was not for Manuel. For example, in some astute comments on what used to be known as cultural imperialism (and is still called that outside academia), he insisted that "the international exchange of TV programmes is not based on the conventional principles of commodity valuation (i.e. assessing the marginal cost of production)." It must be understood "in terms of the political and economic position of the buying country" (Alvarado 1996,).

Ideas had to be concrete to make a mark on Manuel and his collaborators. Their market and nonmarket principles derived from the French Revolutionary cry *liberté, égalité, fraternité* (liberty, equality, solidarity) and the Argentine left's contemporary version *ser ciudadano, tener trabajo, y ser alfabetizado* (citizenship, employment, and

literacy; Martín-Barbero 2001). The first category concerned political rights; the second, material interests; and the third, cultural representation (Rawls 1971). Far from centralized state control constraining choice by people, Manuel made the point that choice is generally constrained by centralized commercial control. The marginal propensity to consume is very marginal indeed for the vast majority.

This critical attitude was related to Manuel's antihumanist position on education. He was rightly dubious about the liberal psy-function's child-centric views. Believing that people went to school and university to learn things they didn't already know, he doubted whether their inner processes and preferences were any better suited to understanding the social world or television genres than to building bridges or piloting planes. The formation of pupils' taste and knowledge had to be theorized, engaged, and changed by comprehending—but not accepting—the “interrelationship of production, distribution, broadcasting, [and] advertising” that generated those pleasures and beliefs. It was vital to appreciate the constraints and opportunities presented by students' “class/cultural background,” “the containing society,” and “their mode of insertion into the school system” (Alvarado 1977,).

Hence his objection to student-centered learning: “[B]y *seeming* to respect ‘their’ culture, the teacher is engaged, essentially, in pacifying their emotional frustrations and accepting a system which the teacher is unquestioningly helping to perpetuate,” posing “as an equal or an elder friend . . . a wise companion or a dictatorial pedant” (Alvarado and Ferguson 1983,).

Relying on students' own interests and interpretations would magnify the dominant, individualistic model of educational success rather than encouraging a form of competition that stressed “group work or struggle.” Furthermore, Manuel feared that “[i]f a teacher works on the basis of what is of interest to his or her pupils it immediately poses the difficulty of how to get beyond talking about (let alone teaching about) students' *experiences*” (Alvarado 1977,) and towards “a pedagogy that precisely does not *depend* upon personal experience” (Alvarado 1981,).

Manuel had considerable experience of racism, for example, but believed that did not “help one to understand, explain or fight it—and it is vital that people learn how to analyse, understand and explain in order to fight things of which they have no personal experience.” This perspective was connected to his skepticism about subcultural theory fetishizing the autonomy of style and fun from corporate and state power and their putative capacity to undermine social relations through spectacle. It particularly irked him when celebrants of resistance failed to “contest and transform the dominant cultural, social, economic, political and linguistic formations” (Alvarado 1981,) because they ignored policies, programs, and other organizational resources for combating “a class stratified, sexist, racist, and ageist social formation” (Alvarado and Ferguson 1983,). Education was a struggle for what counted as knowledge, not a Whiggish narrative unfolding inexorably toward truth and beauty (Alvarado and Boyd-Barrett 1992). History was partial and occupied terrain, a site where historiographic tendencies vied for hegemony through debates over truth and curricula that

rarely acknowledged their own conditions of existence (Alvarado and Ferguson 1983).

If we turn to Manuel's media research, there may appear to be resonances between his studies of how media texts are made, how they signify, and how they are understood (Alvarado and Buscombe 1978; Alvarado and Stewart 1985; Tulloch and Alvarado 1983) and communications studies' sender-message-receiver model (Weaver and Shannon 1963). But whereas the latter accords coeval status to the three points of the chain in a pragmatic quest for the best means of getting one's point across, Manuel favored a much more radical position than this separation of production, meaning, and circulation allows. He regarded these processes, and knowledge of them, as interdependent, complicit parts of a political system. Far from being neutral, separate elements of a conveyor belt, they were mutually inscribed within each other's meanings. His analysis juggled multiple determinations and kept the interrelationships of state, capital, pedagogy, and discourse in tension. Hence his insistence that "'ideology' is not an entity which can or cannot be disseminated through a medium, for that medium is itself part of an ideology" rather than "a transparent channel through which meanings pass" (Alvarado 1981.).

Manuel understood as early as the 1980s that the technological convergence of media forms was consolidating corporate power and that separating meaning and reception from labor denied, for instance, the "actual, concrete activity of consuming ads," which "can be seen as Work" (Alvarado 1988a; Alvarado and Thompson 1990c; also see Alvarado 2000). Years after these apposite provocations, he wrote of "the three stages of commodity existence" in ways that still bewilder orthodoxy media studies, just as they did decades ago (Alvarado 2009a). Such an account was not about improving military or business communication!

Nor did he admire the reduction of culture to hermeneutic interpretation. Manuel criticized literary studies for neglecting "the production, circulation and reading of texts . . . the organisation, ownership and interrelationships of the various publishing houses . . . book advertising and the retail distribution system . . . and the interrelationship between authorship, ownership and copyright" (Alvarado 1981.). Put another way, it was "not enough to analyse the superstructural levels of the media" (Alvarado 1981.).

More recently, he lamented that so much of academia was beholden to self-aggrandizement, the digital sublime, and industry hype. He worried that new media technologies were being understood in terms of their capacities and pleasures without due attention to power and the ties between media forms and social relations. Manuel saw scholarly organizations being dominated by a "moribund cul-de-sac" of "individualistic . . . career advancement." Tendentious "new groupings of organic intellectuals" were essentially excluded (Alvarado 2009b.).

The critique of cloistered CV building came from someone who loved to work collectively—witness projects such as his account of video around the world, which drew on researchers from dozens of countries (Alvarado 1988c) or the way he sought to internationalize media studies through Intellect's cosmopolitan journals series. In

an email discussion not long before he died among *Television & New Media* editorial board members about scholarly overproduction, he wrote, on Monday, February 8, 2010, at 3:14 p.m., that “I prefer the model where one only publishes when asked. . . .” Oh, quick thing—he did all this research and writing while working 10–6 in offices, mostly on other matters. The record shames academics. How on earth do we spend our time?

While Manuel may have been driven by a love of cinema, he regarded television as crucial to progressive political projects because of its, well, popularity. TV absorbed him more than any other medium, I think, and the experience of studying the inner workings of television production showed him how inscrutable it could be, in a way that modeled capitalism itself.

I got a clue to his political concerns on this subject from an essay about television’s duality, its Janus-faced capacity to witness and embody capitalism’s paradoxical desire for publicity and secrecy, marketing and privacy. Manuel recognized that TV wanted to be open as a set of cultural texts, genres, and channels—but closed as a set of political-economic interests, methods, and commitments (Alvarado 1983).

Since he first created that striking homology, television has opened up to the point where it now appears to welcome researchers, provided that they buy into its faux responsiveness to commodified audience reactions (Alvarado 2009a). This development has led a sizeable cohort of the credulous to swallow the Kool-Aid dispensed by midlevel media executives who just love to expose themselves; hence Bart Beaty’s (2009,) telling remark that “media studies has found its objects of study . . . dictated by *Entertainment Weekly*.”

This tendency did not apply to Manuel because of his political impulse to unearth “the actual and potential cracks, fissures, dislocations, and absences that exist within television and television programmes” and ask “*how* things could be done differently” in “oppositional space” (Alvarado 1983). The excitement came from trying to “introduce a new subject area and at the same time question and contest dominant forms of knowledge” (Alvarado and Ferguson 1983,).

How different this is from today’s return to aesthetic criticism based on interpretation and identity, as per film, media, and cultural studies; scientific service to militarism, business, policing, and the professions (s.v. communication studies); and the neoliberal embrace of bourgeois economics undertaken by prelates of the creative industries.

Sadly, we seem to be some distance from his example. But Manuel left a remarkable legacy—a gift, really—that I hope readers will be encouraged to either revisit or engage for the first time to elude the banalities of contemporary cyberbarbarism on its merry way to pronouncing on a virtual Parthenon of plenitude.

A year after the sudden death of his wife, David Edgar (1999) wrote about what loss means to rational people: “For the atheist, human life is . . . essentially incomplete, a story cut off before the end of the last reel.” It feels that way with Manuel: there was more to come. Can media studies deliver it?

Acknowledgment

Thanks to Edward Buscombe, Noel King, Richard Maxwell, Stephen Muecke, and Mila Sterling for comments on earlier drafts. Lest my prose appear somewhat bloodless by contrast to other contributions, can I say that writing this has been traumatic and cathartic? I loved him, but never told him so. It would have been both de trop and an omen of his passing.

Notes

1. See the list of his publications published in this issue.
2. Others have detailed this project more fully in this volume and elsewhere (see Bolas 2009).

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Bio

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