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A Different Definition of “Boob-Tube”: What Dr. Catherine Gale, of *The Avengers*, Taught Women

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Abstract: This paper summarizes a qualitative research project exploring the impact of the first feminist television character, Cathy Gale, of the 1962-64 British television program, *The Avengers*. Contemporaneous British women viewers reveal how Gale’s character helped them reject traditional roles, incorporate the character’s strengths, and seek out other feminist role models.

“There had never been a woman like that on television before—in fact, there had never been a feminist creature before Cathy Gale.”

—Honor Blackman to Dave Rogers, 1986

“[After watching Cathy Gale] Women were leaving their homes, their kitchens and their crèches in droves and going out and starting to throw men over their shoulders, which they've been doing ever since.”

—Patrick Macnee, quoted in Porter, 1995

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore one television show, *The Avengers* (1962-64), and specifically the character of Catherine Gale, as a portal of adult learning. I was particularly interested in investigating the ways in which television can help facilitate the formation of a critical or feminist identity among adult learner viewers. Using Clark’s (1993) definition of transformational learning as “learning as a change of consciousness” (p. 53), I show that popular culture can effect transformational learning.

According to Brookfield (1986), television rarely presents “material directly critical of the structures dominant in society or strongly disapproving of governmental actions” (p. 155). Yet the character of Dr. Catherine Gale did just that, in the 1962-64 British television show, *The Avengers*. Her character is an example of the “opposition and resistance” that can occur when “producers, writers, and performers struggle to create programs which are neither purely palliative nor wholly uncritical of prevailing structures and ideologies” (Brookfield, 1986, p. 155). Despite the fact that the spark of second-wave feminism had not yet been ignited in England, Cathy Gale was written with a doctorate in anthropology, a black-belt in judo, an expertise with firearms, a history of humanitarianism, and a past as both a freedom-fighter and a big-game hunter. Her name, Gale, was meant to evoke the idea of a *gale force* (Miller 1997).

British women watched Honor Blackman play not only a woman equal to a man but, in many ways, one that was superior (Soter, 2002). She has been hailed as “the first feminist to come to a television serial; the first woman to fight back” (Blackman, quoted in Miller, 1997, p. 7), “the first really emancipated feminist” (Clemens, in Madden, 2000), “Britain’s new symbol of womanhood” (Rogers, 1989, p. 15, Teranko, 1969, p.88), and “the first feminist female lead” (Andrae, 1996, p. 115). By 1964, both the character she portrayed—and the actor herself—had so much influence over public opinion that the show was “temporarily banned in England for electoral interference” (Miller, 1997, pp. 2-5). The government feared that her appearance “in a

commercial for the Liberal Party,” for which she had actively campaigned, would unduly influence election results (p. 5). As an educator watching the videos for the first time in 2002, I had to ask myself what British women in the early 1960s learned from watching this powerful woman fight for what she felt was right—often dressed head-to-toe in black leather.

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

Critical adult educators should help learners make meaning of their lives by connecting learning to what they know. Freire and Giroux (1989) insist that critical pedagogy “must incorporate aspects of popular culture as a serious educational discourse” (p. ix). Moreover, Miller (2000) asserts that “adult educators’ theory and practice can be enhanced by taking seriously the texts and pleasures of popular culture” (p. 1). Television has been a major component of popular culture since the 1950s, and is often particularly powerful in the lives of women, because the reality of many women’s experience limits their opportunities for learning. Yet few feminist adult educators have focused on popular television as a purveyor of knowledge and liberating ideas.

Bourdieu (1996) contends that television, particularly television news programs and sports coverage, has the power to shape cultures. He believes that television is a political tool of despots, demagogues, and democracies alike, and that not recognizing the power television exerts over viewers ignorant of the “mechanisms” behind what they watch is a serious mistake on the part of critical educators and anyone seeking social change.

Brookfield (1987), however, cautions against an “overly pessimistic imbalance caused by overestimating the power the media has over our lives” (p. 186). He cites Kennedy’s argument that, “we should balance our view of television as an all-pervasive, controlling agent with the awareness that we are active appropriators, selecting our own meanings out of all the myriad forces to which we are exposed, including television, in our particular historical and social contexts” (p. 187). White (1983) also rejects the deterministic stance that Bourdieu and others adopt towards television. He argues that to view audiences as only acted-upon by, rather than critically participating in, the messages inscribed in their favorite television programs is to insult the viewers and ignore their critical awareness. As van Zoonen (1994) has found in her feminist television research:

Audiences are no longer seen as positioned or interpellated by media texts, subjected to the vicious intentions of patriarchal power and ideology, but are considered to be active producers of meaning, interpreting and accommodating media texts to their own daily lives and culture. Television audiences may sometimes use television, even prime-time drama, as an instrument of positive change in certain circumstances and historical moments. (pp. 149-50)

Armstrong (2000) effectively argues that, far from being a negative influence on adult learning, “television viewing can have tremendous potential for stimulating critical commentary and raising awareness of a wide range of issues” (p. 2).

Furthermore, feminist researchers have examined the effects of popular culture, including television shows designed primarily for female consumption (Brunsdon, D’Acci, & Spigel, 1997). They found, among other things, that women commonly use their reactions to the dilemmas presented in these programs as a springboard for developing methods of dealing with a variety of concomitant situations in their lives. Hooks (1990) clearly sees television entertainment as a vehicle for both learning and activism. These and other feminist researchers

affirm Brookfield's (1986) assertion that, "television's influence is all-pervasive" (p. 152). Their findings suggest that adult educators should focus attention on that influence.

Since the character of Dr. Catherine Gale was radically different from the traditional female television characters of her contemporaries (Gauntlet, 2000), I wanted to explore how she affected women viewers, and to determine if those effects were significant.

Research Design

Because my purpose was to investigate the character's impact on women, I chose a qualitative design. I conducted interviews with twelve British women who watched the Cathy Gale *Avengers* episodes in the early 1960s. To identify my sample I posted a call for participants on The Avengers Forever Website (<http://theavengers.tv/forever>), and I used snowball sampling to find other women interested in participating. I interviewed women primarily in the UK but also in the US, and I conducted these interviews both in person and by phone. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed; then I sent the transcripts electronically to the participants for member-checks, as well as to solicit further comments and recollections. I analyzed the data using the constant comparative method, as well as through the use of several narrative analytic techniques.

I also collected realia¹¹ and related materials (from copies of surviving original scripts to magazine, newspaper, and videoed interviews with the actors, directors, producers, and writers) for qualitative content analysis; in total I analyzed over 40 items. Using this information and the categories that emerged, I searched for similar—or dissimilar—threads in participants' responses. These documents, as well as an interview with one of the show's scriptwriters, informed my analysis of the women's narratives by helping me set the context of their stories.

The Stories

My call for interviews yielded remarkable results. Stories of learning ranged from a scientist who "knew [she] could be a scientist even when everyone told [her] 'girls didn't do that,'" to a trans-gendered (male to female) participant who said,

I have always known that there is a genuine Cathy Gale element within my persona that is available to call forth to help me to deal with difficult confrontational situations. In particular, it prevents me from defaulting into 'male mode' when I have to assert myself.

All the women told stories of how watching the character in their late-teens to mid-20s helped them internalize characteristics that they saw nowhere else in female role models. Most related some variation of, "I learned that I could be what I wanted to be by watching Cathy Gale."

There were numerous indications of perspective transformation that evolved from the "integrating circumstance" (Clark, 1993, p. 54) of relating to, and aspiring to emulate, Cathy Gale. Three major categories of life-altering learning dominated the women's responses:

- 1) They learned that they could reject the traditional gender roles instilled by their culture, families, and religions.
- 2) They learned to incorporate the character's strengths into their personal development as women and human beings.
- 3) They learned to seek out other strong, intelligent, independent feminist role models.

¹¹ Realia: "1. Objects used as teaching aids but not made for that purpose. 2. Real things, actual facts, esp. as distinct from theories about them" (*New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993). I use this term because it encompasses the wide range of items I uncovered and analyzed.

Rejecting Traditional Roles

One participant, Astrid, certainly rejected traditional gender roles. She is a transsexual who transitioned from male to female in the mid-1970s. Hill (2000) discusses the fact that MTF transsexuals utilize numerous self-directed learning projects as “a rite of passage into female adulthood” (p.4). Astrid confirmed this assertion as she discussed how she used her memories of watching Cathy Gale nearly fifteen years before her transition to inform her deliberate transformation into the woman she wanted to be. A petite woman, now in her mid-60s with a soft voice and mischievous smile, she related how the gender identity clinic “set up an evening course . . . through the local education authority. . . . The rationale of the course was essentially to teach men how to look and act and sound like women.” Smiling shyly, she confided that the instructor told them to choose a woman they admired to guide the development of their female personas. After choosing a flattering style of clothing and make-up, she explained, “We now had to work out how I was going to interact, and it was at this point that I started looking round for models.” Because she was “a local government officer” and “in charge of a large male labor force,” she needed a role model who was “professional, and competent, and intelligent, and active.” The only person who came to mind was Honor Blackman as Catherine Gale. She was most attracted to the fact that “she can be commanding when she wishes to be commanding but when she doesn’t wish to be commanding, she can dispose of it.” She goes on to say, “When I’m at business, and especially when I’m having to fight for my point of view, against a male management team. . . I have to switch into Honor Blackman mode.” Against the advice of transgendered mentors who encouraged her to shift to a traditionally female occupation, Astrid chose to persist in the male-dominated career she had chosen as a man.

Other participants related less dramatic but equally transforming lessons learned from Cathy Gale’s strong feminist modeling. According to Katie, “you’d do quite well if you learned to type and do shorthand and get an office job. But you were never expected to then be (pause), one day—the boss. I mean, if you were really, really good, and clever and you wanted a career, you’d be somebody’s secretary.” But watching Cathy Gale in her late teens made her think there could be other possibilities. She “got more tenacious” because of her “admiration for the character.” She wanted to go into theatre, but her parents considered it “next to [being] a prostitute if you wanted to go on stage.” Nevertheless, she and her husband currently produce and act in “amateur theatre” and she operates an Internet business that sells theater memorabilia. Because she drew strength from Cathy Gale’s tenacity in having an “unorthodox career,” she refused to give up her own dreams of working in the theatre.

Julie watched Cathy Gale as an adolescent, and shared memories of youthful rebellious thinking that she credited to her admiration of the character. She watched the gender norms exhibited by her stay-at-home mother and her father and thought, “When I grow up, I’m not going to be like that.” Instead, she dreamed of being a spy or a scientist. Cathy Gale was both: “It never occurred to me that, being a girl, I shouldn’t want to be a spy when I grew up.” Since Cathy Gale was “Dr.” Gale, with a Ph.D. in anthropology, Julie rejected both teachers and peers who tried to keep her from “taking advanced science in school”; she was the only girl in those classes. She wanted to emulate Cathy Gale because other women in movies and television “were pathetic women that fell over when the wind changed . . . that was the other role model, pathetic creatures that needed help. . . Women were not doing things. She (Gale) was the only one.” Julie is currently a successful scientist at a major research university.

Incorporating Cathy Gale's Strength into Personal Development

Connected to their efforts to draw from the character's example to reject traditional gender roles, the women talked of thinking about Cathy Gale's physical, as well as moral, strength when they needed either. In addition to "shifting into Honor Blackman mode" at work, Astrid talked of "painting a picture using the colors drawn from the palette of Cathy Gale" as she began living her life as a woman. She included in this palette the character's professionalism, demeanor and attire, (the tailored suits, hats, and classic style, rather than the leather worn for fight scenes). Liz and Katie both talked of putting on leather boots, made popular by the character, when they needed to feel strong as well as confident. They wore boots in order to help them "take on the character" of Cathy Gale. Julie was one of two participants who spoke of dealing with rejection by "imagining [herself] driving up in a sport convertible wearing black leather." Most of the respondents said that they continue to think actively about the character when they have to confront difficult situations. Two of them said that, even now, they often think to themselves, "What would Cathy do?" When one participant was told not to pursue a particular career because she wasn't physically strong enough, she remembered thinking about Honor Blackman, as Cathy, throwing "20 stone oafs through the air" and said to herself, "I can do this." And did.

Valuing Feminist Role Models

Cathy Gale was the first and only feminist personae on British television in the early 1960s. Women told stories of their intense appreciation for her as their first role model and related stories of searching for similar models throughout their lives. Katie spoke of finding feminist role models in contemporary mystery fiction, like Kay Scarpetta in the novels of Patricia Cornwell and Temperance Brennan in Kathy Reichs' mystery series. Liz, an academician, spoke of finding mentors who "remind [her] of Dr. Catherine Gale, the anthropologist who lectured at erudite societies and always knew everything." While Astrid searched for other role models and found some "bits" she could "take" from Jane Austin heroines and a French newscaster from the 1970s, she admitted that she still "calls forth" the character of Cathy Gale most often. Julie "started reading books about women . . . the first woman doctor and things like that." She looked for people like Cathy Gale who "had just done it. They wanted to [have a particular career] and they just did it."

Implications for Adult Education

My conversations with these women revealed how learning from popular culture can lead to life-altering perspective transformation. The women I interviewed are the women they are because, in part, they watched Cathy Gale as adolescents or young adults. This study was an attempt at a deeper investigation of viewer interaction with popular television than the Stuart Hall (1996) schema of dominant (hegemonic) reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional (counter-hegemonic) reading. It helped me understand how this particular character affected the lives of individual women, as they understand it now and related it to me more than *forty years* after viewing the program. Dr. Catherine Gale encouraged women viewers to explore their options—and to create new ones. They integrated her example into their daily lives. This study focused on expanding and deepening our understanding of audience receptions to include how women learn and incorporate learning into their identities. To date, there has been little critical exploration of transformational learning through popular television viewing. Yet this study clearly indicates that learning can happen any time that preconceived, indoctrinated, or hegemonic ideas, such as gender norms and traditional roles, are challenged in popular culture.

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