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2008 Conference Proceedings (St. Louis, MO)

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Recommended Citation

Tisdell, Elizabeth J.; Thompson, Patricia M.; Guy, Talmadge C.; Sandlin, Jennifer; and Wright, Robin Redmon (2008). "The Role of Media and Popular Culture in the Mis/Education of Adults," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2008/symposia/2>

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The Role of Media and Popular Culture in the Mis/Education of Adults

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Keywords: critical media literacy, popular culture, critical public pedagogy

Abstract: The purpose of this symposium is to explore multiple perspectives on the role of media in the education and mis-education of adults, and to consider how educators might draw on media in developing a critical public pedagogy.

Introduction: Why Study Popular Media in Adult Education

Elizabeth J. Tisdell

Media has a powerful influence on all of us. Consider the following statistics put out by the Media Education Foundation about media and its role in our lives: (a) The average adult watches more than four hours of TV per day; (b) Four hours of television programming contains about 100 ads; (c) The average American child sees about 200,000 violent acts by age 18; (d) The average American youth spends about 1023 hours watching TV every year, but only 900 hours in school; (e) The average American sees nearly two million advertisements by age 65; (f) Thirty percent of local TV news programming is commercials.

Indeed, these statistics are both surprising and alarming. We are constantly bombarded with sounds and images in our daily lives that affect who we are and how we think, both consciously and unconsciously, through news media, entertainment media, and advertisement. Years ago, Adorno (1991) warned of the power of the media in inflicting hegemonic views of the dominant culture that lulled people unconsciously into submission to it. Carter G. Woodson (1933/1998) made a similar argument ten years earlier in relation to the ability of schooling and the “education” system to miseducate African Americans through its hegemonic power. While Woodson (1933) was not talking about the media per se, he was talking about how a hegemonic ideology is passed on through social systems. Indeed, the media is one such system that needs attention in adult education despite some recent publications on the topic (Armstrong, 2005; Guy, 2004, 2007; Sandlin, 2005, 2007; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007a, b; Wright, 2007a, b).

There has been much discussion and many competing perspectives among those who write about media and the wider world of education. As Dolby (2003) observes, there are many who argue (following the work of Adorno and others) that the media primarily reproduce the interests of the dominant culture, and is one of the mega tools of hegemony. Whereas those on the left are critical of media for how they reproduce systems of privilege and oppression and hegemonic processes generally, those on the right tend to focus on the evils of the media in regard to violence and sexual morality. There are also many who have done audience studies who have found that people are not simply pawns of the dominant culture but exercise a considerable amount of agency in creating alternate readings of media (Ellsworth, 2005). In summing up the theoretical perspectives of media studies, Alvermann and Hagood (2000) note that some media scholars focus more on the role of pleasure in media. A second group from cultural studies focus more on how media reproduce or resist the dominant culture. A third is more postmodern, and emphasizes how individuals and groups construct meaning differently

depending on their interests, their positionality, and on the historical and social context. Finally, those coming from feminist educational perspectives highlight how media functions to produce gendered and other group-based identities. In spite of these different and competing perspectives, what most media and education scholars have in common is that they believe it is necessary to teach people to read and deconstruct media: to examine its power to educate and to miseducate; and to both reproduce and resist dominant ideologies. We explore some of these multiple perspectives here in efforts at developing critical media literacy.

Popular Culture and Learning Race, Class, and Gender in America

Talmadge C. Guy

I begin with several assumptions: 1) The mass media should be understood as a system of adult education and learning; 2) the mass media are the primary source of information about the world in which we live; and 3) mass media sources of popular culture form the curriculum from which we learn of socially significant forms of difference, such as race, class, and gender. The mass media are a powerful, though not necessarily unified or centralized system whose products inform and reify race, class and gender.

Ownership of mass media organizations is concentrated in fewer and fewer multinational corporations. News Corp., for example, holds mass media assets able to reach nearly a third of the people on the planet. The ability to control information that can reach this number of people is unprecedented in human history. The reach of global media corporations means the supply of entertainment and consumer and cultural products represents an avalanche of information that bombards consumers every day. A good deal of this content is designed to satisfy consumer needs, wants, and desires through manipulative messages whose ideological aim is to subvert the popular from a radical, democratic force to a domesticating, conformist, consumerist, passive reality. Adorno (1991) argued that mass media products serve to forestall or even prevent the formation of more critical consciousness. Undermining the development of a complex, multifaceted aesthetic, moral and political imagination, the mass media control consciousness in ways that are difficult for even most of us, even the most critical of us, to imagine. As Adorno points out, mass culture produces norms of behavior that are difficult to challenge.

Another aspect of mass mediated popular culture is that the choices we make about the commodities and images produced in the media help to define an identity that connects to some groups and not to others. Learning the choices that help to construct particular identities recognizable by the wider society is an important function of popular culture. Further, the idea that the mass media produce meanings that form a curriculum through which race, class, and gender is “taught” via cinema, music, TV, radio, advertising, and video is one that is gaining ground through the work of scholars such as Giroux (2000), hooks (1996), and others. Through mass mediated popular culture we effectively learn what it means to be “white”, “black”, “straight”, “gay”, “middle class”, “poor”, “wealthy”, “Christian”, “Muslim”, “American”.

Examples of research are plentiful. Entman and Rojecki (2000) studied popular TV programs through the mid to late 1990s. They found that many programs depicted blacks in stereotypical and negative ways producing images of Blacks in the white mind that were disconnected from reality. Whites subconsciously develop cognitive “prototypes” —an image or caricature that stands for the whole group —of what a Black person is. Jacobs’ (1999) study of print media shows a clear difference in the way in which Blacks are represented in white and black newspapers. Similar studies related to gender) demonstrate how women and girls are stereotyped through ads, popular TV shows, music videos and other forms of popular culture.

To combat these effects of mass-produced popular culture, the development of pedagogical strategies that develop critical media literacy is essential. To think for oneself, or to act in authentic ways that produce self-determination is the goal of progressive forms of adult education and learning. Critical media literacy is an important aspect of achieving this goal.

Gender Consciousness, British Women, and *The Avengers*

Robin Redmon Wright

Foucault (1988) argued that people “are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes that have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence *can be criticized and destroyed*” (p. 10). Once the evidence is destroyed, Foucault believed, one can “get free of oneself” and reinscribe new themes on the self. Yet evidence of pervasive themes—such as male hegemony—is sometimes difficult to recognize, much less destroy. According to Arnot (1984) male hegemony should be seen “as a whole series of separate moments through which women have come to accept a male dominated culture, its legality, and their subordination to it and in it” (p. 64). This was especially true at the moment in history before second-wave feminism began to raise some women’s consciousnesses.

My research indicates that women who watched the British crime drama, *The Avengers*, in 1962 to 1964, were situated in a window of history when those “separate moments through which women had come to accept a male dominated culture” were reflected and decimated by the vision of Honor Blackman, as Dr. Cathy Gale. For some young adult women fans, watching *The Avengers* in those early years allowed them to get free of the person they had been socially constructed to be, and to take on a new persona of an empowered human being. It is this confluence of historical moment and popular television that exemplifies the possibility for resistance to hegemonic powers of oppression that sometimes lies in elements of popular culture.

In 1962, producer Leonard White decided that a woman should replace actor Ian Hendry in the lead role on the spy drama, *The Avengers*. Honor Blackman would read the part already written for Ian Hendry, who played a medical doctor named Dr. Keel opposite a co-lead, Patrick Macnee, playing John Steed. Men objected. Rogers (1987) reports that Brian Tesler, Controller of Programmes (sic) for ABC argued that replacing a man with a woman would “a) alienate woman viewers, b) lose other viewers who had obviously enjoyed the bantering camaraderie between Macnee and Hendry, and c) would tend to introduce elements of sex and sexual violence into the series!” (p. 14). Blackman, however, recognized the historical significance of the post-World War II moment: “One thing about Cathy,” she said about her character “is that she’s as tough as blazes. She can take it as well as dish it out. Let’s face it; everyone is tired of the conventional role for the English girl in the English thriller. She sits down looking scared and handing out tea and sympathy. Cathy Gale is new and different” (quoted in Rogers, p. 18).

Dr. Catherine Gale was indeed different. She held a Ph.D. in anthropology, a black belt in judo, rode a motorcycle, and was an expert marksman who led safaris in Africa. She was a resident expert at the British Museum, and was also sought out by the British government for her broad knowledge and expertise (Miller, 1997). This—in 1962! According to Blackman (Personal communication, July 22, 2006) Cathy was “the first [female TV] character who’d really been allowed to be the intellectual equal of the fellow. I mean, before that, one had sort of blue-stockings ladies, but you’d never had a good-looking, shrewd woman who won over the man!” She went on to confess, as if it just occurred to her, “I must admit that I’m part of the fact that it was ground-breaking—that show.”

Indeed, Honor Blackman’s courage in acting a part written for a man—and making it a phenomenon across the U.K. in 1962—was more than “ground-breaking.” It changed the lives

of many young women. The seventeen women I interviewed had literally taken their lives in new and completely different directions because of watching the Cathy Gale *Avengers*. Relating their experiences to me over 40 years after watching it, they described how they rejected traditional roles prescribed for them through their internalization of her character. They went to college, started businesses, took judo classes, and forwent marriage and child-bearing, all because Cathy Gale had shown them that anything was possible for a woman. As Foucault (1988) anticipated, women viewers freed themselves and inscribed a new reality onto their lives.

What has this to do with “adult education”? Cranton (1998) asserts that, “Emancipatory learning is a process of identifying taken-for-granted assumptions, examining them, and gaining a fresh perspective” (p. 151). The women who watched Honor Blackman as Cathy Gale play a role with traditionally male characteristics, while remaining a stunningly beautiful woman, identified taken-for-granted gender-role assumptions, examined them, and reevaluated their life path based on that reevaluation. That is emancipatory, transformational learning. The character of Cathy Gale was also a “happy accident” as *Avengers* writer Brian Clemens (Personal communication, August 24, 2006) explained it. Scripts had already been written for two male leads and the producers did not want to pay for new scripts. It was a Foucauldian “certain moment in history” that facilitated learning from popular television drama. As adult educators in these troubled times, we need to be aware that those moments in history may be occurring in popular spaces on television, through the internet, via gaming, and within Wikis. As critical adult educators, we should be ready to use, those public spaces of learning.

A Writers Strike: Opportunities for Critical Media Literacy

Patricia Thompson

Last year when I wrote about the emergence of new sites for entertainment media to include internet sites such as Youtube™, I had no idea that the “new media” arena would be the catalyst for the 12,000 members of the Writers Guild of America to “trade their laptops for picket signs in New York and Los Angeles” (Carr, 2007, ¶ 2). The strike commenced on November 5, 2007 and ended on February 12, 2008, resulting in most prime time television shows only completing half of their yearly episodes. There will be few “season finales” this year and television enthusiasts will have to wait to find out what happens to their favorite prime time characters. But, has the strike affected the influence of entertainment media in society? Further, how can this specific moment in media history be used as an opportunity for critical media literacy?

Given the high level of media consumption noted earlier, one would think that the disruption in media production caused by the writers’ strike would leave some void in the public psyche. But, the results of opinion polls conducted by both USA Today (Levin, 2007) and Pepperdine University suggest that people adapted by finding alternative forms of entertainment. While most adults (84%) participating in the Pepperdine survey reported knowing that television writers were on strike, 75% of the respondents expressed little concern about its impact on them. It seems that people moved to alternative programming such as sports, news, cooking shows, travel shows, and the Internet for their entertainment. The USA today survey reported that 49% of television viewers chose to watch reruns, 40 % chose alternative media not affected by the strike and approximately 26% chose to rent DVDs. Late night talk shows saw the largest decrease of viewership with only 12 % of the late night viewers choosing to stay awake for reruns. What is even more interesting is how the writers used alternative media outlets such as Youtube™, and Internet blog sites such as Craig Mazin’s artfulwriter.com to get their message

out to the public. Their efforts worked with the majority of television viewers supporting the writers' position as opposed to 14% who favored the studios (Levin, 2007).

This leaves numerous unanswered questions for educators interested in critical media literacy. Recognizing that entertainment media both challenges and reflects the dominant societal discourse, it is interesting to speculate about the effects of the strike on consumers' views of entertainment media. Jennifer Lubke (2007), a secondary educator who has a critical media literacy blog suggests that the strike provides numerous opportunities for critically critiquing media. One example she gives is the numerous references in newspapers and television news to "unscripted reality television." She argues that consumers should recognize that reality television is constructed by a group of people with a certain purpose in mind.

As educators interested in popular culture and entertainment media, it is important that we encourage learners to be both critical consumers and producers (in venues such as Youtube™ and My Space™) of entertainment media. This does not only entail recognizing the negative aspects and influences of the media, but engaging media as critical and ethical consumers and producers. This is not an easy task. Lubke (2007) shares a recent classroom conversation on the subject: "Meaningful contemplation of media is like a fish trying to understand water: near to impossible. We are all too deeply immersed in it. . . How can we step back and critically evaluate something so pervasive and embedded in our society? Someone in class astutely pointed out that we only see the impurities (think: pond scum). And that's what we all tend to dwell upon."

Popular Culture, Cultural Resistance, and Critical Public Pedagogy

Jenny Sandlin

In my recent work, I have been concerned with how popular culture can be used as a tool for resistance, and with how individuals and groups can become cultural producers, in essence creating their own resistant "popular culture" that often takes the *forms* of mainstream popular culture, but that disrupts expectations by carrying and enacting anti-hegemonic messages. I have specifically examined two groups of activists who use these strategies, *Adbusters* and *Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping*. As I analyze these two groups as spaces of critical adult education, where activists are engaging popular culture, I draw from several theoretical arenas.

The work of activists as "critical public pedagogy," following critical curriculum theorists Giroux (2000) and Ellsworth (2005), who focus on everyday life and popular culture as sites of learning is the first influence. "Public pedagogy" refers to the educational force of popular culture; popular culture teaches audiences and participants through the ways it represents people and issues and the kinds of discourses it creates and disseminates. Educators who examine *critical* public pedagogy draw from a Gramscian cultural studies framework, which examines the politics of culture and the possibilities it holds for resistance (Bennett, 1998). That is, culture is a site of conflict, where individuals resist, negotiate, and accommodate power relations. I am particularly interested in the use of culture for "cultural resistance"—or "culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure" (Duncombe, 2002, p. 5). Another influence is social movement learning, specifically focusing on the external educative aspects of social movements (Dykstra & Law, 1994). Dykstra and Law's (1994) framework argues that the "external" dimension of social movements involves a particular kind of critical pedagogy that focuses on (1) *raising social consciousness*, (2) *critical thinking*, (3) *experiential learning*, and (4) *opening up and expanding the imagination*. developing imagination is especially critical to the success of the critical public pedagogy of social movements, because it is here where spaces for transcendent thinking and the possibilities of change are opened up.

My ongoing empirical research thus examines how social activist groups engage with and create popular culture as a means of “critical public pedagogy,” particularly for explicating *how* the public pedagogies of such groups are enacted, and in addressing the possibilities of using cultural resistance as an impetus for social change. Both *Adbusters* and *Reverend Billy* engage in cultural production as they alter and give new, *resistant* meanings to popular cultural symbols. Such cultural resisters interrupt how public spaces are typically used, “in ways that hold the potential for education to be contemporaneous with social change and identities in the making” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 58). These groups demonstrate how popular culture is a field of contestation.

I posit that cultural resistance—because it (re)uses and (re)creates popular culture in unexpected ways—has the potential to engage with the general public and create moments of “détournement” (a “turning around”). These moments of détournement, which often catch learners off-guard and begin to trouble their taken-for-granted ways of knowing and being in the world, have the potential to ignite learners’ imaginations, which helps them to begin re-imagining new forms of societies that are grounded in social justice-based principles. Ellsworth (2005) argues that pedagogy is powerful when it brings “inside and outside, self and other, personal and social into relation” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 38). Further, learning is critically pedagogical when it creates the possibility for both inside and outside—self and society—to be disrupted and refigured (Ellsworth, 2005; Jarvis, 2006). It is only when we are in these moments of dissonance that learning can occur. In the context of *Adbusters’* and *Reverend Billy’s* work, I posit that disjuncture’s learning moment is tied directly to the unexpected uses of popular culture, and to the ways in which cultural resistance can challenge individuals to re-establish their relationships with consumer capitalism. According to Ellsworth, these moments of suspension of self and stricture constitutes powerful learning moments: “Learning takes place in the movement/sensation of the self in dissolution” (p. 157). Indeed, these activists seek out this dissolution of the self and count it as the moment of the possibility of change.

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