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Uncovering Disney's Pedagogy of Classism in Their "Reality" Programming

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Abstract: This paper summarizes a study of reality television programming on Disney-owned cable channels. Fantasy theme analysis via symbolic convergence theory indicates that these pseudo-reality shows featuring working-class people reinforce cultural myths of the US as a meritocracy, promote neo-liberal politics, and glorify *laissez faire* capitalism, while masking the realities of workers' lived experiences and the undemocratic *realities* of the dominant plutocratic system.

Keywords: Disney, symbolic convergence, reality TV, socioeconomic class, tacit learning

Popular culture works to shape the minds and souls of those of us who consume it. Therefore, the claim that reality TV is "just entertainment" or "nothing more than low culture" is just a way of avoiding serious consideration of an increasingly important form of communication, and it's a way of letting reality TV off the ethical hook.

~Wyatt & Bunton, 2012, p.2

In his illuminating archaeological investigation of the origins of cultural studies, Tom Steele (1997) traces its conception and emergence directly to the field of adult education. It is the scholarship of adult educators that has given rise to both cultural studies and, within that broad field, the serious study of popular culture. Without doubt, "the project of cultural studies . . . belongs to the experimentation, interdisciplinarity and political commitment of adult education" (p. 9). It has never been more important that adult educators return to the social justice roots that led us to study culture and to focus research on the informal learning and cultural curriculum of popular culture. This paper offers, for your contemplation, a glimpse into just one of the many reasons I feel this urgency. The rapid proliferation of reality television programs (RTV) since 2001 is astonishing in range and scope, and the genre now dominates broadcast time on most cable stations. While many argue that RTV has swept across cable channels in the 21st century because it is cheap to produce and viewers demand it, anyone who has studied the public pedagogy of popular culture (Giroux, 2000, 2010; Sandlin et. al. 2010) understands that there has to be a neo-liberal political agenda driving that kind of phenomenon. Due to the sheer numbers of RTV programs, I chose to focus on those produced by Disney-owned networks for this investigation. Since many, perhaps most, RTV cable programs feature individuals who are poor/working class in their attempts to realize "the American dream", as stated in the opening monologues of many programs, I sought to understand what messages these programs conveyed about working-class laborers in today's post-industrial, technological, global economy. What I found left me disturbed and appalled.

In this paper, I will briefly outline how this medium of reality television reinforces classist stereotypes and capitalist myths, in order to create a symbolic convergence with viewers that increases support for current *laissez faire* capitalism, with its attendant inequities and widening wealth gap, by providing a shared fantasy of a working-class and poor who are 1) content, even happy, to be poor, 2) proud of their ignorance, their subsistence lifestyle, and their "redneck" social standing, and 3) undeserving of socialistic government programs that provide

opportunities for advancement, authentic education, and mobility into the middle class. In effect, these programs overtly create and visually enact a shared fantasy of a utopian status quo during the deepest economic recession since the Great Depression.

Disney and 24/7 RTV

While Disney may not be the first company to come to mind when one thinks “reality TV”, Disney properties cut across the spectrum of channels and their myriad reality shows play 24/7 on U.S. cable television. In addition to the several named *Disney Channel(s)* and the various *ABC* and *ESPN Networks*, the Disney Company also encompasses *The History Channel(s)*, *A&E*, *The Lifetime Network(s)* and *The Biography Channel(s)*, among others, and owns equity interest in *Hulu* and *Fusion*. Disney is second only to Comcast in the breadth of its television empire (Mirrlees, 2013). Anyone who used to be a fan of *A&E* and the *History Channel* knows what happened after the Disney takeover. Arts, entertainment, and history were systematically replaced by reality programming.

These RTV shows have deviated from the *American Idol*, *Big Brother* and *Survivor* models of a pre-2008-economic-collapse America (although these types of shows are still going strong on major networks) to embrace a model spotlighting depictions of members of lower socioeconomic classes, their families, their jobs, their hobbies and habits, and their personalities. In this short paper there is not enough space to list the expanding catalog of such programs, but it includes many hugely popular titles like *Duck Dynasty*, *Ax Men*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Pawn Stars*, *Storage Wars*, *Appalachian Outlaws*, *Bad Ink*, *American Chopper*, *American Hoggers*, and *Shipping Wars*. All feature stereo-typed working-class, or as in the case of *Duck Dynasty*, pseudo-working-class, people—mostly White men—pursuing economic success as rugged individuals and unsung heroes who thrive in a service economy and have no need for labor unions, benefit packages, or any other kind of social safety net.

The “Reality” of RTV

It is important to emphasize that “reality” television does not depict reality. Spigel (2004) recognized over a decade ago that RTV had “morphed into highly contrived, serialized spectacles where real people acting as themselves play out increasing ‘perverse’ scenarios” (p. 3). It has continued to morph away from any semblance of reality and toward scripted, stylized and highly-edited versions of manual laborers as possessors of exciting, fulfilling lives. According to Winant (2014), such depictions deflect viewers’ feelings of hopelessness and the “increasingly common experience of humiliation and insecurity on the job” and redirects it backward to a (for the most part fictitious) time when workers inhabited a world where hard work (manual labor) and inventiveness born of necessity are recognized and rewarded. Winant goes on to argue that RTV “stages and reifies into commodity form, a utopia of work: a long-lost no-place in which capital has the qualities of labor, workers are invisible, bosses are heroes, and toil leaves a meaningful—often physical—impact on the world” (p. 69).

That there is a dearth of reality in reality TV should be evident since typically RTV is, indeed, scripted television. Even back in 2005, thirty-nine percent of all writing jobs for television were for RTV (Miller, 2010). Moreover, directors shoot many hours of footage and edit it down to the 22 minutes or so seen in a typical half-hour episode. Clearly, RTV does not depict reality. Instead, highly educated, highly paid professionals write scenes and dialogue and edit footage to tell stories that suit the agendas of the underwriting corporations, like Disney.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This qualitative content analysis (Merrigan & Huston, 2009) of Disney's working-class reality programming is framed by critical theory and filtered through symbolic convergence theory. Symbolic convergence theory (SCT) "explains the appearance of a group consciousness, with its implied shared emotions, motives, and meanings, not in terms of individual daydreams and scripts but rather in terms of socially shared narrations or fantasies" (Bormann, 1985, p. 128). Such an approach enables researchers to investigate how groups become caught up in fantasy narratives that are promoted by the media and through other culturally shared experiences. SCT also explores how these narratives are used by their creators to break tensions that arise around those shared fantasies—like when a shared cultural narrative of democratic equality is challenged by the experiences of most people at a time of unprecedented wealth disparity. According to Bormann (1985):

When members of a mass media audience share a fantasy they jointly experience the same emotions, develop common heroes and villains, celebrate certain actions as laudable, and interpret some aspect of their common experience in the same way. They thus come to a 'symbolic convergence' about that part of their common experiences. (p. 131)

Yet, in corporate-constructed media narratives, this common experience is often far from our lived reality. Rather, media-generated fantasy themes become stories we can tell ourselves to make ourselves feel better.

In order to analyze fantasy themes in Disney's RTV, I adapted Bormann's (1972) list of questions. The list is too long to include here, but examples are: Who are the main characters?, Who are the heroes and villains?, What values are inherent in the heroes?, What are the typical scenarios?, and What emotions do the dramatizations evoke? As a result, I identified a number of dominant fantasy theme characteristics. Using those characteristics, I then searched for fantasy types and the symbolic cues, or "cryptic allusions to common symbolic ground" (Bormann, 1985, p. 6). With these types and cues, I was able to recognize the overarching rhetorical vision as a "righteous master analogue" that "stresses the correct way of doing things with its concerns about right and wrong, proper and improper, superior and inferior, moral and immoral, and just and unjust" (Cragan & Shields, 1995, p. 42). That righteous master analogue was revealed to be the rightness and fairness of capitalism's fundamental tenets of personal responsibility, the supremacy of individual effort, and the preservation of individual liberty. Therefore, the workers who risk their lives or find a way to make money in a failed economy are American heroes living the American dream. That master narrative was supported by the three recurring fantasy themes discussed in the next section.

Findings: The *Real-ity*

In RTV working-class labor is depicted as heroic, and workers are either hyper-masculine, independent, and too proud to accept help (especially from government programs), or they are portrayed as ignorant and juvenile and—successful or not—shown spending most of their time pursuing questionable schemes, activities, or vices instead of work. These characteristics, according to SCT, supply the "sanctioning agent" which is the legitimizing force guiding the narrative. The sanctioning agent is often a lofty ideal, like justice or democracy or freedom. (Cragan & Shields, 1995). In this case the characteristics of hero or juvenile are rhetorically linked directly with democracy/justice/freedom by emphasizing the workers' "choice" (with no recognition that alternatives are absent or few) which sanctions and wholly supports the righteous master analogue.

The fantasy themes that emerged fit perfectly with much of the right-wing rhetoric emerging in current political campaigns: working people are content with their lot, proud of their lack of social capital and education, satisfied with their socioeconomic status, defenders of their liberties, confident of their independence, and undeserving—or even disdainful—of government programs that might provide educational opportunities and various forms of assistance for them and their peers. Predominantly focused on men, these programs completely mask the realities of inadequate or nonexistent health care, nonexistent benefit packages, little or no job security, workplace safety, and a catalog of other working-class concerns. Collective bargaining for improved working conditions, pay or benefits does not enter into the dialogue. Instead, workers are shown to be i) brave heroes who risk death to ensure the populace an unending supply of consumer goods; ii) scavenging capitalists who make money off others' misfortune, or iii) childish man-boys who work only enough to survive so they can spend most of their time playing or pursuing self-interests. These efforts to eke out a living are shown to be choices based on the *characteristics* of the groups above. The “reality” stars can be seen enacting a right-wing platform on social programs.

Heroes and Hard Work

In RTV programs that glorify workers as heroes, viewers are introduced to rugged men doing dangerous jobs, usually in very competitive scenarios. The losers have no money to feed their family for a season, but it's their fault—they lost—they just didn't try hard enough. Such shows proliferate on Disney-owned cable channels and include the shows *Ax Men*, *Big Rig Bounty Hunters*, and *Ice Road Truckers*. These jobs are difficult, physically demanding, and are routinely either low-waged or with payment upon job-completion—with the caveat that the job is often near impossible to complete. These programs are generally scored with classic rock (to fit the audience's taste) like Aerosmith's “Living on the Edge”. They heroicize workers who take on these risky jobs elevating them “to the status of mythic creatures—noble, virtuous, manly—whose sacrifices ensure a comfortable standard of living for the population at large” (Fleras & Dixon, 2011, p. 594). The truth is that these workers are forced to labor far from home, are often hurt on the job, are frequently paid under the table, and seldom have the benefits of retirement, health insurance, sick leave or vacation time. Yet they are portrayed as heroes in a way that conceals the truth and history of “how the blue-collar working class as professional risk-takers generate wealth for those who own or control” capital. (Fleras & Dixon, 2011, p. 594). Instead, the RTV “stars” describe themselves as living the American Dream, using their brawn to provide for their (absent) families. They are shown to be proud, individualistic, and happy with their place in the economic hierarchy, even though they sometimes end up with little or nothing to show for their labor.

Wheelers and Dealers

A second group of RTV programs feature people who, as small-scale capitalists, manage to do just fine, according to the fantasy, in a bad economy. This collection of shows includes titles like *Pawn Stars*, *American Pickers*, and *Storage Wars*. These popular shows are often cloned and set in different parts of the country to fill TV time. Based on the basic idea that, in a capitalist country, anyone can start a business and buy and sell products, these shows portray such ventures as fun, while holding out the *possibility* of being lucrative. The narrative serves “to perpetuate the myth of a classless society, where upward mobility is simply a question of individual virtue” (Leistyna, 2008, p. 148). The RTV stars who buy and sell merchandise are the

ones with the “individual virtue” (work ethic, intelligence, ability) and those unfortunate people who lose their goods because they cannot pay storage fees, or were forced to divert their limited funds to pay bills or feed children, are often depicted as simply not smart enough to know what they have or to hold on to it. It’s a question of individual talent, not structural inequalities. As Poniewozik (2011) puts it, “It’s as if cable TV ha[s] entered the post-apocalypse, half its denizens scrounging the ruins of a once rich civilization, the other half carting off their goods for appraisal” (p. 59). These shows exemplify the myth of meritocracy and characterize struggling working people as lacking—lacking the wherewithal to simply make it, juxtaposed against the small-time capitalist “stars” who have.

Gimme a Good Time

The third group, and the most insidious in my opinion, is the collection of RTV programs that depict rather poor people who are shown to be quite happy with their lot in life because, of course, they *chose* to be poor. Shows like *Down East Dickering*, *Swamp People*, *Appalachian Outlaws*, and *Mountain Men*. Again set to rock anthems like Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Simple Kind of Man,” these programs follow people who proudly claim to have no connection to corporate America and are pleased to survive on the edge of poverty through a variety of means and schemes, just as the opening monologue of *Down East Dickering* clearly indicates: Revealing a group of men 4-wheeling off road, the voice over proclaims, “Welcome to the good life. Around here we don’t answer to anyone. No bosses, no rules, and the best of everything.” The people depicted in these programs either barter for everything they acquire or they have become complete luddites living off the land. No social security, no insurance or health care, no security at all. Each “deal” or hunting trip is literally life-or-death, accentuated by their claim to be too proud for government assistance. Yet they manage to spend much of each program camping, fishing, 4-wheeling off-road, and engaging in other recreational activities. These are the happy poor—independent, child-like, “living the good life” as several programs constantly reiterate—the mantra repeatedly transmitted with the assurance that the message (whether overt or subliminal) is being clearly received. They are poor by choice and if they fail, the fault is their own. Government help of any kind would only “spoil” these children. It is the populace’s duty to live and let live.

Implications for Adult Education

According to Pozner (2010), “Reality TV’s mockery of the poor and calculated elevation of the (branded) superrich speaks to the wider dearth of opportunity in the United States at a time when education, housing, healthcare, childcare, and even adequate nutrition are becoming less and less accessible” (p. 157). Clearly, adult education has a role to play in helping people to recognize reality, rather than converge their thinking with the fantasy themes enacted in RTV. Paoli-Lebailly (2010) reports that, as of 2010, more people are watching RTV than television dramas for the first time in history. The fantasy themes enacted by American RTV clearly support neoliberal myths of meritocracy and uphold a capitalist ideal. Winant points out that, “The true, if secret, subject of these shows is capital’s contempt for labor, and its attempt, through the culture industry, to rouse the working class to join in an act of self-loathing” (p. 71). My analysis of the fantasy themes supports that claim. And, sadly, Disney is at the fore-front of the corporations using the culture industry to laud capitalism, promote neoliberal views, and support the myths that deflect critical analysis of structural and institutionalized inequality (Giroux, 2010; Giroux & Pollock, 2010). Disney’s RTV has millions of avid fans but its

portrayal of workers in a depressed economy inhabited by desperate people is insidious. These characters are shown adapting to the loss of good jobs and shrinking benefits in late capitalism by taking on dangerous or disgusting work for minimal pay, or living hand-to-mouth by finding stuff to sell, either legally or illegally as in the case of shows like *Appalachian Outlaws*. As Serpe (2013) points out, these programs serve to naturalize “an unforgiving social landscape, where taking risks at others’ expense is the way to get ahead” (p. 17). A more detailed report of findings from this study can be found in a new book on the Disney curriculum (Wright, 2016). What I hope this summary offers is a glimpse into the politics behind what many dismiss as mindless television. With the overwhelming number and staggering popularity of RTV, critical adult educators must teach people how to critically analyze products of the culture industries as well as the political agendas they transmit through their created *versions* of reality.

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