Critical Media Pedagogy: Lessons from the Thinking Television Project

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This article examines the results of a 4-year long student-based media education project entitled "Thinking Television." This project focuses on interrogating the cultural terrain of contemporary television and developing an alternate vocabulary with attention paid to issues of multiculturalism and popular culture. Students in a media research class were simultaneously exposed to literature in critical/cultural studies and were asked to develop television show proposals. The findings from the "Thinking Television" project allow us to re-think issues of critical media literacy and television criticism. We raise questions about the limits of critical media literacy and those of identity formation in an information society. These two concerns are then tied into our central concern which is of the disjunction between production and theory and the creation of alternate pedagogies of media education.

KEYTERMS critical media literacy, thinking television, race and media education, production versus critical approaches

There are perhaps few topics that are as relevant to the field of communication theory and research as the study of media education. Journalism schools have as their core mission both the training of future media practitioners and of media scholars. Media education in this sense is the connecting bridge between the various schools of thought that have emerged in the study of communication and the pedagogies of education that are used in communication departments. For all of its importance, the idea of media education remains fuzzy and amenable to whatever meaning institutions or individuals give to it, from hands-on production skills, to critical theory, with many variations in between. In this article we consider a pedagogical exploration in bridging this range. This is not in an attempt to answer the question of what media education should be but...
rather an effort to explore the viability of connecting critical media literacy with traditional production education.

This article examines the results of a 4-year student-based media education project called "Thinking Television". The project focused on interrogating the cultural terrain of contemporary television and developing an alternate vocabulary for television. Based on formal course evaluations and comments the project seems to have been a success with students. What we hope to do in this article, is not focus on the project's successes but what we see as its overall failure: to produce culturally transformative television. In the concluding part of this article, we offer a set of questions (rather than answers) about how our project might impact issues of critical media literacy, postmodernism, and popular culture.

Douglas Kellner's influential work on media, culture and education provides the overall framework for how we see the role of media education. As a beginning point, Kellner (1995) suggested that we focus not on education or media per se but rather on the terrain of culture:

> The concrete struggles of each society are played out in the texts of media culture, especially in the commercial media of the culture industries, which produce texts that must resonate with people's concerns if they are to be profitable and popular. Culture has never been more important and never before have we had such a need for serious scrutiny of contemporary culture. (p. 20)

Kellner (1995) suggested that media education should take the lead in providing a scrutiny of the cultural impact of commercial media, especially as they relate to the encoding of media messages and their role as agents of dominant cultural ideologies, "It is important to be able to perceive the various ideological voices and codes in the artifacts of our common culture and to distinguish between hegemonic ideologies and those images, discourses, and texts that subvert the dominant ideologies" (p. 335).

Kellner (1995) did not posit the role of the media as unproblematically hegemonic but rather signaled the importance of the role of media education as one where media messages can be subverted through the work of educators, scholars, and students as active agents in the functioning of democracy:

> The question of who will control the media of the future and debates over the public's access to media, media accountability and responsibility, media funding and regulation, and what kinds of cultures are best for cultivating individual freedom, democracy and human happiness and well being will become increasingly important in the future. The proliferation of media culture and technologies focuses attention on the importance of media politics and the need for public intervention in debates over the future of media culture and communications. (p. 337)

For Kellner, then, the question of the future of media culture and communication is tied to an act of a critical engagement with media practices. The word critical also serves as the defining term for a specific kind of media education termed critical media pedagogy. Kellner (1995) clearly defined the role of this method: "Critical Media pedagogy can serve as part of a process of social enlightenment" (p. 34).

The "Thinking Television" project is located within this tradition that assumes that "media education is not about uncritical imitation of existing media forms, still less about
celebrating them" (Hart, 1991, p. 229). Teachers should encourage students to "experiment with alternatives, and to break or play around with dominant codes and conventions, than to slavishly reproduce dominant media forms (Hart, 1991, p. 229).

Critical Media Literacy

Critical media literacy is a concept best defined by taking into account work in cultural studies that deals with providing an understanding of how media are part of everyday life. This includes understanding how critical thinking helps to construct people’s knowledge of the world and the various social, economic, and political positions they occupy within it. It is also about creating communities of active readers who can be expected to decide for themselves what textual positions they wish to assume as they interact with complex social and cultural contexts (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagoed, 1999).

The literature of critical media pedagogy embraces the thinking of feminist theorists, cultural studies scholars, and postmodern and postcolonial analysts who assert that education's role as preserver and promoter of a society's dominant political structures and cultural values must be challenged (Brereton, 2001; Kellner, 1995; Lusad, 1991; McLaren, Hammer, Sholle, & Reilly, 1995). Critical pedagogy aspires to stimulate students' critical thinking about the assumptions that maintain these traditional power relationships. Some media educators that embrace a critical approach focus on germinating students' abilities to critically examine political and cultural assumptions of a society as communicated through its media products (Aufderheide, 2000; Gitlin, 2001; Sholle & Denski, 1993). Others suggest that the task of critical media literacy involves both deconstruction and reconstruction of media texts and practices. For example, students are encouraged to understand advertising strategies that aggressively identify and commodify their own rebellions and resistance (Frank, 1997). As Masterman (1988) put it:

Cultural reproduction is a poor aim for media education. It is uncritical. It enslaves rather than liberates. It freezes the impulses toward action and change. It naturalizes current conventions, and thus encourages conformity and deference. Media education, on the other hand, in raising questions about how media texts are constructed (and might be constructed differently) and in its insistence upon the nature of media texts as the products of specific human choices, aims to encourage not only practical criticism but a genuinely critical practice. (p. 21)

The “Thinking Television” project focuses on the idea of critical practice that Masterman talks about. We use the term critical practice to mean the creation of media products that include social criticism but are also created by producers who take into account applied, market-, and production-based factors. Such a project, as discussed in the next section, is uncommon in media education.

Critical Media Literacy, Communication Research and Production/Market Research-Oriented Courses. Communication studies has come into its own as a formal discipline in the last three decades (Hart, 1992), and the discipline's growth has seen an active, healthy debate as to its origins and future directions (see special issues of Journal of Communication in 1984 and 1994). There remains, however, one area where the “connect” between the theory and practice of communication remains unexamined in any systematic way, which is in
the disjunction between what can be variously described as the "skills" or "practice" of media production and courses that focus on the theorization of media processes. As Sholle and Denski (1995) put it:

Contemporary media education is characterized by a condition most closely resembling that of schizophrenia. Media educators trained not as educators but as theorists, live categorically distinct separate lives. These are lives lived at desk and in libraries, as producers of media theory; lives engaged in the analysis and criticism of the mechanisms of mass mediated hegemony, describing the intricacies of processes through which dominant cultural values are reproduced... And lives lived at the lectern in the media production classroom; lives, at least partially, engaged in the reproduction of dominant culture and dominant practice. (p. 8)

There are a number of ways this schizophrenia is manifested. Textbooks that deal with mass communication often focus on media theory with little connection between the practice of media production and marketing. Such a disconnect is common in most introductory mass communication textbooks (e.g., Dominick, Sherman, & Messere, 2000; Priest, 1996) but also extend to books that are theoretical overviews of the field of mass communication (e.g., Debray, 1996; Perry, 2002). The situation is not much better in the literature of media/cultural studies, which is characterized by a focus on a critical assessment of mass media messages and the deconstruction of their hidden ideologies rather than on the production of messages. A survey of some common cultural and critical studies readers (Berger, 1991, 2000; Downing, Mohammadi & Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1995; Fiske, 1982) revealed close attention to the connections between media institutions, economic interests, and textual decoding but very little attention to the creation of media messages and their success in the media marketplace.

In production courses, the integration of a critical approach is challenged by institutional values that place students' marketability above all other considerations. Furthermore, key support of traditional media production curricula is frequently funded by the media industry. Journalism school administrators are sensitive to supporting activities that will not alienate these donors.

Sholle and Denski (1993) lamented the restrictive influences of these commercial interests, but they rejected curricular separation between criticism and production; rather they advocated building bridges between the instrumental and critical objectives within the media education curriculum and individual media courses.

In the "Thinking Television" project, we follow Denski's (1994) recommendation to remove the delineation between critical theory and production practice. He asserted that the student of mass communication will not be prepared for democratic participation if her experience remains compartmentalized into spectator/audience, critical viewer, and media creator (Denski, 1994).

**Thinking Television: Project Pedagogy/Practice**

The pedagogical goals of the "Thinking Television" project simply put are to allow students to "think about television" and to create "television that thinks." Our project thus involves outcomes of an effort to carry out the link between theory and practice. During
the last 4-years within a large Southeastern public university, the College of Journalism
and Mass Communication’s telecommunications curriculum has included a required
course, Media Research Theory, that introduces critical approaches to researching television
program development. This course emphasizes the use of various theoretical founda-
tions and critical contexts in researching and conceptualizing original programming.
The course structure also models a participatory and democratic process. So although
students are introduced to critical theories, they determine the extent of their own
engagement with these critical and cultural approaches to their television program
proposals.

The students’ goal in the “Thinking Television” assignment is to create a program
concept that will reflect a reality that is not commonly available on the major television
distribution outlets and, at the same time, a program concept that will sell. Although they
may or may not choose to incorporate critical approaches in their program conception,
students must attempt to create a program idea that “makes a difference.” Meanwhile,
the program concept must appeal to audiences and must appear marketable based on
knowledge of what the distribution outlets are buying. These goals recreate the real-world
tensions that often decrease the likelihood that innovative programming will be produced
and distributed. Requiring students to engage in this dilemma assures that they will work
to link theory and practice. The extent to which they choose to negotiate this dilemma
should be reflected in their proposals, both in their explanations of rationale and program
philosophy and in their creative integration of these ideas into program formats,
characters, plots, and other creative choices.

The impetus for creating the methodology that underpins the “Thinking Television”
project comes from a variety of sources. The first is the need to create a pedagogy that is
student centered. This is reflected in the project’s approach in two specific ways: topic
and approach. Students are actively encouraged to use their knowledge of contemporary
television fare as they attempt to create a television show concept. In doing so, we follow
Luke’s (1997) call for “An urgent need for educators to engage constructively with media,
popular and youth culture to better understand how these discourses structure childhood,
adolescence and students knowledge” (p. 1).

However, the focus on popular culture is not based on just the need to be student
centered but on the omnipresence of popular culture in contemporary society. Our goals
then, lie in acknowledging that “the ability to read and critique popular culture is signifi-
cant in an age of expanding consumerism and in the sheer abundance of media messages
from popular culture” (Alvermann et al., 1999, p. 2).

The second feature of our pedagogy is how we let students approach their task.
Rather than providing students with a model for “good” television, we let them work it
out inductively through discussions of existing shows, critique through focus groups, and
training in the vocabulary of television criticism through a textual analysis paper on a
show they choose to analyze. Our rationale for this comes from the idea that classrooms,
too, are spaces of power, and students’ perceptions of agency will impact how they
approach the goals of the “Thinking Television” project. “[P]edagogy becomes a tool
levied against the students’ pleasures derived from TV programs, from rock music, and
popular culture more generally” (Luke, 1997, p. 4). As Alverman et al. (1999) noted,
when teachers take this approach, “students are quick to become protective of their actual
thoughts and instead begin to read the text from what they perceive to be the teacher’s
perspective” (p. 26).
Research Questions

The primary questions of the current examination are: How will students articulate critical/cultural perspectives in the rationale and philosophy of their program proposals? To what extent are they able to integrate the critical-cultural approach into the program's format and content? Finally, how do students mediate the contradictory imperatives of presenting commercially viable programming and at the same time, programming that is sensitive to issues central to critical/cultural theory (e.g., issues of multiculturalism, race, class, gender, and sexuality).

Premise/Philosophy

Students were free to choose whether or not they would take a critical and theoretical approach to their program's premise or philosophy. Therefore, each proposal was examined to determine whether the program embraced a critically situated premise. Examination of the treatment of the genre, hosts, characters, and plots also provided evidence of how the premise was conceptualized.

Articulation of Critical Approach

When a critical approach is taken, how well do the authors articulate the critical and cultural theories that ground their rationale (i.e., are terms appropriately defined and used and are arguments logically advanced throughout the proposal)?

Conflicts between the Critical Premise and Commercial Viability

To what extent does the program proposal challenge values implicit in commercial sponsorship? Do the authors recognize and confront these conflicts? Do they attempt to resolve these conflicts?

Method

To gather evidence of how students integrate critical thinking with the television production process, five program proposals were randomly selected for analysis from a universe of 40 proposals. Each was examined with a focus on three criteria: the show's premise/philosophy, articulation of a critical approach, and reconciliation of critical premise with commercial viability.

The sample of proposals for analysis was drawn from the universe of the show proposals submitted over a period of 4 years. Typically, each class has between 40 to 60 students. Each proposal is produced by a group of 5 students. The numbers of groups in each class range from 8 to 12. Groups were free to address or not address critical pedagogy goals, and some student groups did not engage with these challenges. For the purposes of this study, we were not interested in shows that did not deal with the goals of critical pedagogy, and we have not analyzed the approximately 11% of all proposals that did address these issues. The five proposals examined were randomly selected from the universe of 40 using
of a table of random numbers. The decision to sample 20% of the universe for analysis was based on a subjective appraisal of our sample as compared with the universe of proposals and our determination that these five proposals proportionately represented the programming genres found in the universe of proposals.

The Shows

The distribution of genres in this sample is representative of the range of shows found among the 40 student program proposals: situation comedy/drama, variety music, and game show. Narrative situational comedy/drama is the most commonly proposed genre type; of five randomly selected proposals, three are situation comedy/dramas: Interesting But Not Surprising (INS), Everyone is an Addict, and Flames, Dames and Games. One proposal is for a variety music show, SoundCheck, and another is a game format, UnderCovers. We will consider these five program proposals in our analysis and discussion.

SoundCheck

The five students who created this proposal describe the program's rationale in the following statement: "By showcasing local bands and including often ignored musical genres, SoundCheck will allow marginalized culture producers to be heard nationally." They state that the goal of the program is "to entertain and expand the musical minds of our viewers thus bringing all musical cultures together." This rationale suggests that these students understand that groups may be excluded or "marginalized" from the mainstream, in this case mainstream music marketing. Their use of the term culture producers also indicates their awareness of the commodification of culture. Implicit in their rationale is the assertion that producers of culture and their products, in this instance music, may be marginalized in the marketplace due to lack of access to national audiences.

Their proposal addresses this political economic reality. They are particularly focused on bringing these marginalized cultural products to the attention of the national marketplace. To this end they have a strategy: Launching a careful Internet marketing scheme to elicit the audience to select the local bands to be featured. They recognize the website's democratizing potential. "A website allows the audience to vote on bands, chat and exchange information, thus democratizing the spectator's experience."

The SoundCheck authors demonstrate an understanding of inclusion and democratic participation, and they also demonstrate that the demands of the marketplace require compromises. Therefore, "in a concession to marketing, SoundCheck chooses a female sex symbol as the host." They do acknowledge this choice as a compromise, but they do not acknowledge the price of this compromise in terms of gender stereotyping and exploitation. Does this "concession" indicate a contradiction? From their presentation it appears that the three female and two male authors of SoundCheck recognize that to use female sexuality for the sake of their marketing goal is a "concession" to commercialism. However, the seriousness of any conflict that the authors may have experienced over this concession is not revealed in the proposal. The evocative, low angle shot of their chosen host, Kidada Jones, wearing a bikini-style, satin ensemble, hands on her hips, staring down at the spectator, suggests that the authors are comfortable with their concession.
Although SoundCheck focuses on minority voices outside the musical establishment and its adherence to generic formulas (presumably tied to mass audiences), the three situation comedy/drama proposals address an issue directly derived from students’ reading of critical/cultural theories. What all of the situation comedy/drama proposals have in common is an attempt at creating multicultural television and story lines that increase awareness of diversity through characters with a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

**Interesting but Not Surprising**

In the proposal for *Interesting but Not Surprising*, the student group describes their program proposal as a “sitcom” about a working class family in New York City that “offers a look at a modern, dysfunctional, inter-racial family.” Like the authors of the SoundCheck proposal, this group uses the vocabulary of critical theory: “The text asks if diversification of race, culture and occupation can allow a family to function in the U.S. The answer is yes.”

Their concept is presented as an innovation, a program that can make a difference by representing a multi-ethnic working class family:

> A program can do a public service by introducing people to convoluted characters and story lines which will make their own lives seem normal by comparison instead of inadequate, a feeling one can get by watching most network sitcoms and dramas.

They argue that by portraying working class family members who have “random jobs” (e.g., cab driver, karate instructor, salad maker and porn actor), they are portraying normal people with whom the financially struggling (18 to 25-year-old) audience will identify. “This show reflects the idea that there is a rise in working-class families ... it shows how a multicultural working-class family can survive in America.”

In addition to creating a multicultural family with a Puerto Rican mother and a German/Russian father, they also attempt to break with traditional gender roles. In this family the father looks to the mother for leadership. She is in control while he is weak and sentimental. In one episode the mother, a karate instructor, is trying to persuade the father to take karate so he can learn to protect himself.

The description of the first episode, however, strays far from the premise of multicultural working-class people struggling to survive. The ambiguity of the authors’ assertion that “the text elevates roles, stereotypes, values, sex and gender, race, ethnicity and social class to another level of representation on television” is compounded by their introduction of celebrity guests. The father, who is a cab driver, picks up the Spice Girls who recognize his last name as being the same name as that of their favorite pornography star. When they discover that their cab driver is the pornography star’s father, they ask him to take them home to meet his son. The plot line that ensues does nothing to advance a realistic representation of a working-class multi-ethnic family.

**Everyone’s an Addict**

The second situation comedy is entitled *Everyone’s an Addict*. The setting is a rehabilitation clinic devoted to treating clients with a variety of addictive behaviors. The
authors assert that the issue of addiction has never been the primary focus of a TV situation comedy. They explain that every participant in their focus groups "knew someone who had been in rehab, so we feel that this topic is familiar enough with target audience to be appealing." The authors describe characters that represent a range in age, ethnicity, and social backgrounds. Their rationale does attempt to address multiculturalism. "Our show will focus primarily on the interactions between these vastly different characters and the ways in which they contradict and/or reinforce their respective stereotypes."

Meeting the psychological and entertainment needs of their 18 to 25-year-old audience is "an ultimate goal" for these authors who wish to "give young adults a show where they can deal with issues that may concern them but in a lighthearted manner." They argue that the show will be entertaining, not insulting. They suggest that Everyone's an Addict will reveal that "people today seem to really need some sort of addiction to identify themselves." The generalization about the association between addiction and identity is unsettling and made more so by the casual tone and unsupported context of the assertion. We are left to wonder if "everyone today" refers to our authors and their peers.

This particular negotiation between a cultural approach and a marketable premise is complex. The authors seem to believe that they will make a difference by raising issues that have been avoided by popular television. They argue that by dealing with addiction within the humorous and entertaining sitcom genre, they will be encouraging open discussion about behaviors (i.e., addictions that are at the core of many young adults' identities). If we accept that these authors are conveying their own social reality, we can appreciate that their premise embodies an attempt at a socially responsible program that will make a difference. Most notable about the Everyone's an Addict example is that the student authors are sufficiently empowered (perhaps in part by the democratic structure of the course) to reframe addiction as a mainstream experience, with strong relevance to the general 18–25 year-old audience.

Flames, Games and Dames

The authors of the third situation comedy proposal chose this format but rejected a clichéd portrayal of "a world of beautiful hip young people that is often associated with sitcoms targeting the 18–25 year-old audience." Their stated goal is to create a situation comedy/drama that portrays a diverse cast of characters with an emphasis on reality, honesty, and well-developed characters and relationships. Flames, Games and Dames is set in a casino resort in Wisconsin. The concept is based on an intergenerational and ethnically diverse cast and plot lines. The lead character is a White, 19-year-old male who has been raised at the casino by his single, croupier mom and nurtured by a group of older men known as the "posse." A Native American woman owns the casino. The young male's mother is dating an African American man.

These authors never explicitly articulate a critical perspective in their proposal, but they are critical of the lack of authenticity and the superficiality of characters and situations portrayed in typical sitcoms targeted to their age group. Apparently, they do not see a contradiction between their intention to convey reality, the casino setting, and the blackjack dealer mom. Nevertheless, they have created a situation that includes ethnic and intergenerational diversity, and they have developed detailed characterizations that
could yield rich and complex character relationships within the ongoing situation comedy/drama.

The most powerful person in the situation is the casino’s owner, Miranda, who is a Native American female and older than fifty. By assigning dominant status to an older minority female, the authors have transcended several stereotypes. The intergenerational theme is developed through the lead character, Alex, and his relationship with the “posse,” a group of over 60-year-old men who hang around the casino and who have been important male role models to Alex as he has grown up. This group includes three White men—a former English professor, a retired army cook, an Italian American with shady business dealings—and one Native American who is a friend of the casino owner.

The multicultural and intergenerational theme is well developed in the Flames, Dames and Games proposal despite a lack of references to critical theory. Evidence that the students’ integration of newly acquired critical thinking may be incomplete, though is revealed by the striking contradiction between their intention to portray authenticity and their choice of exotic gambling resort environment.

UnderCovers

The authors of our final example, UnderCovers, describe the concept as a hybrid format that combines the attributes of a sexual issues show, like MTV’s Lovelife and a game show. They make no explicit claim for a critical perspective but promote the program as something new, a cross genre that has social significance: “Our program will attempt to cut a new niche for sexual discourse on television.” They explain that UnderCovers will explore sexuality and promote exchange of sexual information in a “non threatening and highly popular format.” Referencing their survey and focus group research, the authors asserted that “most people of this age group would not be offended by talk of promiscuity, sex play or homosexuality” but that they would object to “deviations from societal and legal norms such as pedophilia and bestiality.”

In the rationale for the program, the authors argue that sexual dialogue is more common and more accepted in Western European countries like France and the Netherlands, where teen birth rates are 76% lower than in the United States. They criticize typical situational comedies targeted to the 18–25 demographic as “veiling sexuality with innuendo, thus giving sex the air of impurity that hinders sexual dialogue.” Meanwhile, the authors contrast their concept as encouraging dialogue about sexual behaviors and thus as providing a socially responsible alternative to the ambiguous veiled sexual innuendo typically found in the situational comedies. However, their proposal goes on to contradict this goal by claiming that “this show will be successful both for its edginess and for its voyeuristic appeal.”

That voyeurism implies secrecy and shame and has more in common with “veiled sexual innuendo” than socially responsible sexual dialogue which seems indiscernible to the authors. They reveal no awareness of a contradiction between honest sexual dialogue that could promote sex education among the target audience and “voyeuristic appeal.” Once again this contradiction implies that the students have not integrated the values from a critical/cultural theoretical perspective and remain under the influence of commercial, mass media conventions.
Discussion

The “Thinking Television” project responds to Denski’s 1994 call for a critical pedagogy in the mass communication curriculum that will introduce value questions. These curriculum-specific goals draw from an overall agenda for critical/cultural media education. As the editors of one the most popular multicultural studies textbooks put it:

Cultural studies is part of a critical media pedagogy that enables individuals to resist media manipulation and to increase their freedom and individuality. It can empower people to gain sovereignty over their culture and enable them to struggle for alternative cultures and political change. Cultural studies can be seen as part of the struggle for a better society and a better life. (Dines & Humez, 1995, p. 15)

Specifically, the five projects from the “Thinking Television” project need to be assessed in terms of linking the goals of a critical/cultural studies curriculum with those that underlie issues of “quality television” within the media industry. Williams (1994) outline this dynamic in reference to “quality television” : “the term refers most generally to television’s ongoing negotiation of the tension between economics and aesthetics” (p. 142). She saw this relationship as the tension between the production of television as text and the production of a television as commodity.

Williams (1994) went on to describe this relationship between aesthetics and economics as a “thorny” one (p. 142). “Thorny” could also well describe our experience with coming to terms with these five student projects. We will now describe what we feel are some of the salient issues that have emerged from our reading of these projects and their implications specifically, for issues of the development of a critical media pedagogy, and generally for issues outlined above.

All the students’ shows articulate the tension between textual production and commodity production. This can be analyzed in detail using the show SoundCheck and the figure of the host, Kidada Jones. Her choice can be read as commercial mediation, a nod to the marketplace for alternate music to be (paradoxically) institutionalized but can also be seen as symbolic of the junction within feminist politics and youth culture and that between feminist politics and post-feminism. Both contexts underlie a specific moment within post-modernist politics, that of a locus beyond modernist notions of centered selves and, in the American context, the establishment of a culture of post-political correctness. McRobbie’s (1999) reading of rave culture bears examination for our reading of Kidada Jones. McRobbie saw rave culture within the broader context of the changing climate of sexual politics. As she put it:

In rave girls are highly sexual in their dress and appearance. The tension in raves comes, it seems, from remaining in control, and at the same time losing themselves in dance and music. The body signifies sociability and self-sufficiency. The communality of the crowd is balanced by the singularity of the person. Subcultural style is in this instance a metaphor for sexual protection. (p. 81)

We are not suggesting that Kidada Jones represents the articulation of the specific ambivalence that rave projects (sexual projection vs. control), but rather that Jones represents the direct referencing of the tension between the idea of the communality of the crowd (in this case the marketplace) and that of self-sufficiency or subalteran agency
(that of non-mainstream music). The questions for critical media pedagogy that Sound-Check raises (and for which we have no answer) are those of the ambivalence of the commodified object/viewer/consumer. If cultural objects (like Jones), viewers and consumers (like the students) are simultaneously commercial and aesthetic, then what kinds of agency does a critical media pedagogy have? What are the limitations of a critical media pedagogy that assume a distinction between these two domains? Is it better to acknowledge that a successful critical media pedagogy should not attempt reconciliation of the aesthetic and the commercial but assume their complicity and interpretation? Explicit in the cultural studies literature is a commitment to keeping the tensions between these two imperatives intact. The task facing us in cultural studies is "to conceptualize the relation between the two sides of communication process—the material and the discursive, the economic and the cultural—without collapsing either one into the other" (Morely, 1997, p. 4).

It appears from our reading of all these shows that it is only once we assume their concomitance that a marriage can be made minimally between youth culture and critical media pedagogy. These issues become even more "thorny" as we look at the four shows that focused on issues of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism is defined in the Dines and Humez (1995) textbook in this fashion:

Multiculturalism affirms the worth of different types of cultures and cultural groups, claiming for instance that Black, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay and lesbian, and other oppressed and marginal voices have their own validity and importance. (p. 8)

In the textbook read by the students, Robert Hanke (1995) stated, "At its core multiculturalism is a struggle over the representation of the experiences claims values and demands of subaltern groups" (p. 364).

Given the context of these definitions, what makes their reading of multiculturalism "thorny" is the use of "displacement devices" to articulate issues of multiculturalism. We use the term displacement devices to mean the placement of a multicultural cast within either a setting that subsumes the character/texts function as embodying cultural politics or to one emboldening a populist notion of collectivity. In the case of Everyone's an Addict, this assumes a common acknowledgement of addiction as a multicultural aesthetic; in the case of Flames, Games and Dames, that of gambling; in the case of Undercover, a fascination with voyeurism; and finally in Interestingly Not Surprising, the highly colorful but, in the end, a not so subtle reinforcement of the common thematic of the incoherent immigrant (Latka in Taxi, Balki in Perfect Strangers) validated through the attentions of a commodity central to mainstream media, the Spice Girls.

The questions these shows raise (again, to which we have no answer) are straightforward. How does critical media pedagogy deal with multiculturalism as seen in these shows? Are notions of multiculturalism dependent on modernist identity forms (race, gender, class, and sexuality) with their assumptions of separation and co-existence redundant to a young student audience who grew up in a postmodern culture? Are these displacement devices evidence of the manipulation of a dominant mainstream mechanism for effacing difference in ethnicity and identity, or are they devices through which a new vocabulary for identifying commonality is emerging?

Certainly it appears that critical media pedagogy needs to actively understand and engage with the complicated engagement of multiculturalism under conditions of
postmodernism. Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in the complexity of these young adults’ highly mediated postmodern/information-saturated lifetimes. So much of their experience has been mirrored back to them, repackaged with the intent of selling to them by means of their own narcissism. If the range of post-modern vocabularies (niche cable channels, Internet sites, computers) has bred a postmodern social formation, then what is the role of media education for an audience of viewers and producers who are brought up without the vocabulary of an unitary modernism. If postmodern “processes are also producing increased cultural fragmentation, changes in the experience of space and time, and new modes of experience, subjectivity and culture” (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 3), then does a critical media literacy assume the emergence of cultural universals around discourses (such as drug addiction, gambling, and voyeurism) as the new terrain for identifying difference and commonality? What are the discursive strategies for articulating mass audiences when none exist?

At the core of all these questions is an overarching issue: What is the link between critical media literacy and postmodernism? As Sholle and Denski (1993) put it:

The bleak nihilism of postmodernist deconstruction must be connected to critical pedagogy’s project of reconstruction . . . We must seek to connect postmodernism’s notions of culture, difference and subjectivity with the modernist concerns for the language of public life, thus reaffirming “a public philosophy” that broadens and deepens individual liberties and rights through rather than against a radical notion of democracy. (pp. 16–17)

The questions that we have raised in this section speak to the problem inherent in the mission set out by Sholle and Denski—the mismatch between a critical media literacy based on modernist notions of politics and identity and textual production by postmodern subjects (like our students). While we agree with them that “educational theory must engage with the popular as the background that informs students engagement with any pedagogical encounter” (Sholle & Denski, 1993, p. 19), we also offer words of caution. The work of postmodern culture and its subjects is overwhelming work that assumes the effacement of difference, the assumption of a post-political correctness ideology. In terms of identity politics, students lack the cultural tools to deal with what we can term unassimilated difference. Only when difference (class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality) is assimilated through commodification is it permitted to play a part in how issues of multiculturalism, identity and democracy are discussed.

Looking Forward

Finally, we return to the problem that we began with: the reconciliation of practice with theory, of production courses with theory courses. Once again, the lessons we have learned take the form of questions we raise and not answers we provide. We have concluded that this effort to combine critical thinking and production conceptualization reflects the difficulty students have with integrating critical theory and production practice. Yet this conclusion does not preclude the possibility of alternative approaches that may be more successful in helping students transcend the divide. For example, would the integration process be more successful if students were exposed to courses in critical/cultural studies prior to studying aspects of media production?
Another central question is one of vocabulary. The language of semiotics and other critical theory tends to dramatically separate the novice reader from the scholar. Where a television program is a “text” and a discussion a “discourse,” access to the ideas expressed can only be gained after the vocabulary is mastered, suggesting that only those with a specialized education deserve access to these ideas. The irony is that critical/cultural theory works hard at arguing for democratic participation, inclusion and diversity, while shutting out anyone who is not willing or inclined to learn a specialized vocabulary. Efforts to demystify the language of critical pedagogy may be the best insurance that these ideas will flow into students’ thinking. And as with any interdisciplinary endeavor, the effort to communicate without reliance on specialized vocabularies should enhance collaboration between faculty who teach critical studies and those who teach production.

But should the goals of media criticism and education classes be to reject the vocabularies of modernist notions of identity and cultural assimilation? What kinds of lessons do projects that attempt to tie in theory and method, criticism, and production provide for future practitioners? Is their will to marry the aesthetic and the commercial, in the end, a culturally productive one for a multicultural society? Should we step out of the way (as this project has) and let students evolve an emergent vocabulary for cultural assimilation? We suggest that these questions in the end need to be tackled through a process of collective mediation, a terrain that both the students and the teachers sorely need to traverse. However, even as we take on the task of finding this common terrain—which is popular culture—close attention needs to be paid to the complexity of the task. Success will be in tied in great part to examining the relationship between critical media pedagogy and popular culture.

It is important to acknowledge the pleasure that popular culture affords students. However, when concern for students’ pleasures overrides all other interests, critical media literacy falls prey to validating students’ pleasures without building on and improving their critique of the media (Alverman et al., 1999). Teachers must be aware of the tenuous relation between students’ pleasures from and analysis of popular culture. They must be cognizant of the struggle that often emerges as a result of committing to both the pleasure principle and the process of critical analysis (Alverman et al., 1999).

Finally, we close with a traditional call for action: to remain open to understanding our failures rather than our successes and to allow for the unexpected disruption of boundaries in classrooms. As Richards (1998) puts it:

"Teaching should create the conditions in which the cultural logic of students’ experience can emerge—conditions which favor dialogue rather than interrogation. This can entail a provisional suspension of the knowledge a teacher believes is important and an effort to adopt a degree of mobility between cultural positions. This is not a simple cultural relativism but an attempt to grasp that what teacher may regard as “limits” may be, for students meaningful boundaries. (p. 17)"

Notes

1 Formal incorporation of media literacy varies across countries. Pat Brereton’s innovative guide to media education (2001) summarizes the main features of media literacy movements in Australia, Ireland, Canada, Britain and the United States. She suggested that media literacy is most developed in Australia where it is part of the English curriculum. Media literacy in Canada has the institutional support of organization such as the
Canadian Association of Media Education Organizations (CAMA), but like Ireland, lacks any overall focus. In the United Kingdom, debates around media literacy have focused on the separation of media education and media studies. In the United States, she suggested that there is “a strong conformist trend within education to de-politicize all forms of literacy. This remains at odds with the roots of the discipline, particularly in the UK, which is predicated on an ideological critique of dominant culture” (Breton, 2001, p. 111). Within the broad media literacy literature our approach is associated with a critical theory of the media education. This theory, as described by Denski (1994), engages the dilemma of the undergraduate media educator who prepares future media television professionals. Education of television professionals traditionally involves teaching techniques of social control exerted via the television production process by corporate interests. The cycle of social control perpetuated by mass media professionals who lack a critical analysis may be interrupted and democratic processes better served by the inclusion of critical media education.

2 Students were required to read Critical Approaches to Television by Leah R. Vande Berg, Lawrence A. Wenner and Bruce E. Gronbeck (1988). This text provides a definition of criticism and a context and rationale for a critical analysis of television.

3 Students’ capacity for democratic participation could be enhanced by their ability to integrate social criticism with literacy in moving image production. Cultivation of this capacity is becoming particularly salient with the growth of a relatively low-cost distribution network for video via broadband Internet (http://bdoc.gov). One solution may be to unite critique with media creation/production within the undergraduate electronic media/telecommunications curriculum (Sholle, 1994). The assumption is that undergraduate students who are introduced to a critical approach to the media may then produce communications that resist the hegemony of profit seeking, sponsored communication and give space to society’s otherwise marginalized and silenced voices (Sholle, 1994). In other words, students primed by exposure to critical and cultural theories may bring these ideas into the realm of media production to create work that is itself critical. This innovation could provide an alternative to the derivative work that media production students routinely create as they master production skills, a status quo that Sholle and Denski (1993, pp. 297–321) lamented.

4 The methodology of the “Thinking Television” project has evolved over the last 3 years and is predicated on three pedagogical principles: learning through doing, empowerment through self-discovery, and the core principle—“Make Money, Make a Difference.” Learning through doing implies a focus on understanding media practices and creating media products by a process of actualization rather than theoretical learning in the abstract. Empowerment through self-discovery is centered on the premise that people bring themselves to a task if they feel that it is a goal that they have set for themselves rather than one that a teacher or somebody in power dictates. Finally, “Make Money, Make a Difference” reiterates the idea that successful shows need to do the work of democracy and the work of capitalism—a tie that few critical media literacy projects address.

5 The group assignment requires using audience research to develop new media products for a student age population (18 to 25 years). The first section of each group’s product proposal is the rationale, which should address how current media products do not meet the needs of a certain population or inadequately address the complexity of social issues that interest the group. This section is based on a textual reading of a sample of media products and interviews with respondents. The second section deals with product philosophy and addresses the overall aim of the proposed media product (e.g., empowerment of certain populations, how a cultural issue is viewed, and creating a better media environment). Marketability must be addressed using findings from demographic and psychographic sources. Finally, three sample shows are outlined. The shows developed by the students vary by topic such as: a) college experience (shows such as Fall of Freshman, Campus Bullseye, Broad Topics, Life, Assignment College, Tale Gate, All About U and Campus Cohorts); b) new reality TV such as American Sales whose goal was “to walk in the shoes of minorities—native Americans, musicians, gang members, nudists, religious cults, terminal diseases, people with tattoos,” and the show, Oh, Holl, whose goal was to “stereotype behavior instead of race. We make fun of character traits such as uncleanness and crudeness;” c) multicultural shows which included Paradise City (a multicultural soap opera in New Mexico); In the Mix (a multicultural classroom and the students who live off campus); Max Action (a cop drama parody); Point Five 0, (a cop situational comedy starring Gary Coleman and Emmanuel Lewis that includes subplots about dwarf slavery rings); and Bleeker Street (multicultural friends get together in New York); d) music-based shows such as Rock Box (which looked at what’s happening “behind the music”; e) an assortment of concept shows including Links (where audiences log onto links.com to suggest ways that an exotic series of characters—dancers, porn stars, a southern girl and a working class African-American woman—lives unfold); Virtual Endorse (a science fiction/detective show), runaway.com (an hour-long drama focusing on high school students and how technology impacts their lives); and On the Move (a parody of a news magazine show); and f) media critic shows, which included the show Tube Talk and I Can’t Watch This.

6 The idea of media as industrial products was expressed by Frankfort School founder Walter Benjamin (1933) who identified the technology of film reproduction as key to the obsolescence of art as unique expression. Thus, Benjamin initiated an analogy between mass communication and industrial mass production and the specter of technology’s dominance over individual human expression. Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) advanced the comparison; they defined cultural products like radio programming, films, magazines, architecture and commercial music as the output of highly centralized production processes that were narrowly conceived to
support the steel, electrical, oil and chemical industries that financed them via the cultivation of consumer audiences. These Frankfurt School scholars, joined by philosopher-critics of technological ascendency Marcuse and Habermas, contributed to a scholarship of critical analysis that gradually found its way into the media education curricula in the United States.

References


