

## That's Entertainment: Pedagogy and the Popular

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As our notions of texts have broadened to include more than simply the written (an essential step in the awareness of difference), the composition classroom has become a site for not only literature and prose, but for films, music, advertising, TV shows, etc. This change raises numerous questions about the potentiality of a pedagogy of the popular. Teachers should consider the role of images and representations in our (and our students') lives. After accepting that this is a significant matter in the identification of subjectivities, we must wonder to what extent identity is formed by popular culture. My main concerns are the potential virtues and drawbacks of using popular culture texts in the composition classroom and raising and investigating issues that delve into student awareness of the construction of perception in light of mass consumption. The examination of the popular is significant, for it allows students to de-mythologize and thereafter critically analyze an industry which can often take advantage of them.

Re-canonization and certain epistemologies have informed teachers of the possibility of locating, composing, and teaching "otherness." Hopefully, this has allowed for digressions in the monolithic nature of "proper" discourse, allowing for non-standardized forms of written and verbal communication. Awareness of the potential significance of social structure in behavior is important, yet limited. The limit to which we can connect a student's social reality and his or her critical writing and thinking cannot be mediated in any absolute sense, for although the social realities of sexism, homophobia, racism can little be denied, it would be presumptuous of us to assume much about a particular student's writing or thinking based solely upon that student's gender, sexual orientation, and race. Students, I would contend, are at least as likely to define their identities not only around their gender, racial, sexual, religious orientations, but also around their cultural interests.

While the popular is unquestionably a site of pleasure, it also acts as a basis of knowledge and socialization. The popular is associated not only with common culture, but with "low" art. Culture and popular culture are symbiotic, essentially quite similar, but we tend to define the latter as derivative of the former. Many often seem to embrace antiquated notions of "high" versus "low" art; consequently, for example, rock music, despite its complexities and impact, remains a de-privileged aesthetic for many. Television too would belong in this maligned category, and film, for the most part, would as well. What television, rock music, and

film often have in common is that they are all potentially very sexy. It is the primal (at least, frequently potential) eroticism of these mediums that, perhaps, has led to their being de-privileged in the classrooms. Even popular films are often not those taught in cinema courses; yet it is this sexiness which we must accept as a prime factor in the shaping of student identities.

Henry Giroux has long been investigating the ways in which popular culture shapes knowledge and socializes individuals. He claims, in *Border Crossings*, that "the study of popular culture offers the possibility of understanding how a politics of pleasure serves to address students in a way that shapes and sometimes secures the often contradictory relations students have to both schooling and the politics of everyday life" (182). The life/school connection seems particularly significant, especially at a time when English departments are beginning to re-evaluate the ways in which their discourses relate to non-school or post-school experiences. Significantly, Giroux later states that:

*[t]o make the popular the object of study within schools is to run the risk of not only reconstituting the meaning and pleasures of cultural forms but also of forcing students into a discourse and form of analysis that is at odds with their notion of what is considered pedagogically acceptable and properly distant from their everyday lives outside of school.*  
(196)

An appeal to the iconoclastic nature of so many young students seems to have the potential (though limited) of inciting not only critical response, but critical response with an investment of interest (and I and many English teachers enjoy nothing more than a lively class discussion). Moreover, popular culture is a form of knowledge which students bring to the classroom; hence they can enter the classroom dynamic with a strong sense of subject familiarity, a familiarity which can go far in de-centering the position of teacher—a contemporary concern for many theorists and practitioners.

We can little ignore the extent to which popular culture organizes our social identities. To the impressionable late teenager, this would seem to be particularly true. To focus solely on literary issues or popular multicultural issues at the expense of this significant means of shaping would appear to create an unfortunate gulf between student and instructor. In our desire to appropriate otherness, we have limited ourselves to defining the other by standards which omit many different possibilities. For instance, to what extent might a student believe herself to be an other because

of the music that she listens to? Might her musical interests shape her social patterns? Of course, music does not necessarily bring individuals together, yet the sharing of a similar cultural pleasure would seem to be a meaningful part of relationships.

In spite of its relevance, students resist analysis of popular culture, in part because the popular is a source of much pleasure. Popular culture sites are transitory, shifting from privileged to ignored—flavors change rapidly. But students rabidly covet their flavor of the day, sporting a shirt with a band's name written on it, hanging a movie poster in a dorm room, arguing about the merits of a television show. For Lawrence Grossberg, popular culture "is arguably the most powerful determinant of our libidinal and affective lives, where desires and pleasures, joys and pains, emotions and moods are rapidly constructed and deconstructed, promised and withdrawn, celebrated and realized" (94). Icons of the popular are so influential that we often project ourselves onto representations and images. One can imagine a majority of our students (if not ourselves) fantasizing about living a rock star or movie star's life. To then critically analyze a text of the star is to bastardize our own projected fantasy.

Popular culture texts should be analyzed not only in spite of resistance but because of it. This site of struggle, according to Schwoch, et al, is important insofar as it may promote "critical citizenship," a pedagogy that stresses egalitarianism and social difference. The authors claim that "[a]s part of the promotion of critical citizenship, students and educators must explore the relationships between the work they do in class and the lives they live outside of class" (xi). It is often in areas of marked tension—like those between everyday and school life—where students can potentially have the most to gain. Spheres of attraction and sexuality are, furthermore, sites of great tension for many students. By acknowledging the sexiness of popular culture texts and investigating their production, we might be able to fracture resistance. By recognizing sensuality, we are affirming that these are texts that are pleasurable before being meaningful. Teachers should investigate this pleasure.

The key to incorporating popular culture into a pedagogy is to have the students recognize that the produced images can be questioned and challenged. For Giroux and McClaren, it is then significant to "establish

the relativity of all forms of representation by situating them in historical and social constructions that both inform their content and structure their ideological parameters" (xxix). Part of establishing this relativity of forms is an awareness that popular texts are border sites, connecting personal student and teacher experience and taste with school knowledge, i.e., "authoritative" texts, the teacher-centered classroom, etc. This intersection is a site of struggle. As such, its potential role in being a teaching tool becomes apparent, for it is often tension, or struggle, which births critical knowledge and insight.

The popular culture mediums that I have taught include television shows, magazine advertising, rock lyrics, and films. Additionally, I have taught essays analyzing these particular products. To mimic the ways in which I imagine a popular culture-influenced classroom should look, I have made several attempts to allow students to choose cultural items for analysis. Students therefore can begin to be critical of texts adored by them. On other occasions I have incorporated those cultural texts which I find appealing to my tastes, hoping that there might be a point of connection with my students, but realizing that if there is not, there still exists the possibility (perhaps enhanced) that the students will be critical of the works. At times, the criticism amounts to a position of defensiveness wherein students claim that the piece is "just" a lyric or film. I would suggest that this conception of a critical safe-zone emerges not simply from the nature of the popular genre, but from the ways in which popular genres are produced and represented.

By taking student experience into serious consideration, teaching the popular in a class devoted primarily to prose or literature can make the familiar strange. We often work with what the students might consider foreign, yet we might very well take the familiar for granted. I do not envision a re-canonization that replaces the traditional with the popular. Rather, I think similar critical skills can be applied similarly to both. Popular culture is not finally the whole of youth existence; rather it is one significant component in the construction of youth identity. Teachers might consider other aspects of the everyday, whether it be the student's wardrobe, mannerisms, eating habits, or indulgence in drugs and alcohol. The possibilities for connection seem quite fruitful.