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Professional Resource:

Rethinking Popular Culture and Media (2011)

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Rethinking Popular Culture and Media, edited by Elizabeth Marshall and Özlem Sensoy. (2011). Rethinking Schools: Milwaukee, WI.

Recently it seems that critical media literacy approaches to media education, which encourage students to examine the economic, institutional, and power structures of mass media (Kellner and Share 2007; Alvermann and Moon 1999; Lewis and Jhally 1998; Giroux 1994; Kilbourne 1999), are somewhat unfashionable in an age of omnipresent, interactive mobile media. In participatory culture theory, scholars generally celebrate the ingenuity and creativity youth bring to media composition and communication as fans and independent producers (Jenkins 2006). The role of critique in the media literacy community has, for many scholars, moved away from thinking about the power and economics behind media construction in so-called “passive” contexts like popular television, music, and film, to thinking instead about the ways that users create meaning through their own interests and peer cultures, often in informal learning contexts, as in the MacArthur Connected Learning model (Digital Media and Learning Hub 2012; Ito 2012). In contrast, *Rethinking Popular Culture and Media* (Marshall & Sensoy, 2011), a collection of essays from *Rethinking Schools* magazine and other sources, positions itself as a series of accessible critiques of economic and social power in mass media and popular culture within K-12 environments, and as such carries forward critical media literacy in a participatory age. Its six sections focus on media economics, critical histories, problematic or oppressive social representations, the development of critical analysis skills, the promotion of social justice, and intentionally transgressive uses of popular culture (or “culture jamming”), respectively. Unlike their Connected

Learning counterparts, these scholars and practitioners rarely engage with digital or online media environments in the course of the book’s critical analyses and case studies, focusing instead on consumer-oriented media like popular film, television, literature, and music. The need for continued scholarly and practice-based engagement with so-called “passive” modes of media reception and production is important, if marginalized; mass media and popular culture are still a dominant aspect of children’s media use and constitute much of their experience with media (Rideout, Foher, and Roberts 2009). However, *Rethinking Popular Culture and Media* does not always give its wide range of youth popular culture the thoughtful, inquiry-based treatment it deserves. Some authors bring inflexible beliefs, opinions, and interpretations to rich, if often problematic, youth popular culture and media worlds. These inflexible perspectives tend to treat mass media and popular culture as a threat or contaminant that, as one author claims, is “taking away [young students’] chance to just be little kids” (38). The predominant tone is set in the book’s opening chapter—commercial popular culture, editors from *Rethinking Schools* claim, “infects every public (and ‘private’) space, making the values of the market the dominant criteria by which everything is judged” (14). Such rhetoric makes it difficult to understand young people’s varied uses of popular culture, and their honest enjoyment and engagement with it, with respect and empathy. Instead, young people are helpless to “infection” of commercialized messages that surround them. Such a framework denies the possibility that students may still exhibit creativity, imagination, and playfulness even in their use of branded and mass media entertainment (Jenkins 1998, Scolari 2009), or conversely that students may enact forms of play that replicate social norms and hierarchy in the world around them even without

the subconscious urging of commercial mass media, as scholars have noted as early as Vygotsky (1978). The majority of selections in *Rethinking Popular Culture and Media* do little to engage with educators who are generally trusting of commercialized media within the safer confines of their own tastes, or who are actively suspicious of alternative media and counter-histories. Teachers who presumably would most benefit from alternative perspectives to integrating mass media and popular culture in their classrooms may be put off by the cultural rhetoric of authors who smugly reference ills of mass media and popular culture that should be “obvious” to readers. In one offensive piece republished from *The Nation*, Barbara Ehrenreich (author of *Nickel and Dimed*) jokingly claims that the Disney Princess product line “is saturated with a particularly potent time-release form of the date-rape drug” (46). It would not be productive here to illuminate the ways in which many commentators and scholars perform their unquestioned cynicism of the role of all commercial media texts in the lives of children and teens. These contributors attack easy targets like Disney, Barbie, hip-hop music videos, and fashion magazines without indicating any real intent to understand them or their complicated social functions in the lives of young people.

Some of the strongest pieces in the book manage to illuminate systems of economics and power in the construction of media messages in ways that are nonetheless accessible to K-12 students. These pieces do not simply assume the role of power in mass media construction but, rather, actively explore constructedness through inquiry, allow for diverse interpretations, and welcome ambiguity and social issues that defy easy solutions. In part 1 (“Study the Relationship Among Corporations, Youth, and Schooling”), Seattle high school teacher Larry Steele uses textbook economics to explain the realities of sweat-shop labor to his high school students; the students then try to “give those workers a better deal” (51) by balancing retail and celebrity endorsement costs. Games and role-play of economic systems like big-box retail development and transnational labor make the classroom a safe space for explorations of the inner-workings of big business rather than assuming that such workings are de facto oppressive and leaving it at that.

When educators are open to asking questions of their students without imposing judgments on them in advance, they are often surprised by the complexity

of student responses. In part 3 (“Examine Race, Class, Gender, Sexuality, and Social Histories in Popular Culture Media”), Kindergarten teacher Kate Lyman reminds readers that students can disagree about gender stereotypes as young as age seven. When one of her students claimed that women are better bakers than men, another student gave the example of a father who was an excellent cook. When kindergarten students were shown images of a Barbie doll, they spontaneously commented on the disproportionate and racialized dimensions of the doll’s appearance, seemingly without prompting or coaching from the teacher. Later in part 3, eleventh grade English teacher Heidi Tolentino reflects on a fraught but respectful conversation about “the N-word” with culturally diverse students after first being flummoxed at the introduction of the topic. By owning her own anxieties, she claims, she was later better able to appreciate that “anti-racist teaching requires a willingness to go where students’ responses take us” and that teachers must therefore “be willing to deal with the unexpected” (162).

The book’s alternative perspectives on commonly understood textbook histories throughout part 2 of the book (“Critique How Popular Culture and Media Frame Historical Events and Actors”) are useful in the way that they counter the myths of children’s literature and textbooks. Herbert Kohl reveals the myths in civil rights literature for children that lead many history and social studies teachers to portray Rosa Parks as an accidental and passive member of the civil rights movement, downplaying her radical politics and commitment to peaceful civil disobedience. Bill Bigelow presents a colonialist history of the Columbus story that is often reserved for undergraduate history and politics courses. Ruth Shagoury examines how picture books of the Hellen Keller story frequently whitewash Keller’s history as a “socialist and a suffragist” (93). The editors’ contribution on popular young adult novels with Middle Eastern subjects examines the reductive ways in which these fiction books, like *Under the Persimmon Tree* and *Broken Moon*, deny voice and agency to the young women they depict. Especially in an era in which textbooks are politically targeted to erase counter-cultural history and social justice movements (McKinley 2010), demystifying the authority of popular narratives is crucial to fostering young people’s honest, critical, and nuanced perceptions of history. Alternative histories can spur critical questioning among readers.

However, critical readings cannot simply be presented as the right answer, or as the only answer.

In narrowing their willingness to imagine popular culture as a site of exploration and learning far more complicated than one-directional oppression or indoctrination, many authors in this collection simply replace one form of unquestioned and passive engagement (a commercial one) with another (an ostensibly critical one), without genuinely opening up their classrooms—and their own value systems—to the profound vulnerabilities and ambiguities inherent in exploring popular culture in the classroom (Moore 2011). Could the *Rethinking Schools* authors attacked by right-wing critics investigate what might motivate this backlash from a cultural perspective? Or are they content with the observation in part 5 (“Take Action for a Just Society”) that as a progressive force, *Rethinking Schools* is righteously “stepping on powerful toes” (274)? Such approaches to teaching popular culture can often result in students parroting desired responses to teachers in the classroom (Buckingham 2003). These inflexible approaches may also reinforce vulnerable students’ perceptions that there is no place for pleasure in discussing popular culture texts or in sharing cultural attitudes that teachers do not respect (Turnbull 1998)—an outcome that makes it difficult for teachers to foster a trusting environment that opens the classroom to honest discussion of students’ lived experiences.

Despite rhetoric about participation and inclusivity in digital media environments, mass media and popular culture are still at the forefront of how young people and adults alike shape their own values about the world; simply wishing away the empowering or harmful potential of mass media and popular culture in educative contexts ultimately does a disservice to the profound complexities of engaging with young people’s lived experiences with media. The confidence with which so many of these authors proffer a solution to what they view as problematic media systems and representations diminishes the power of the book’s most insightful contributions, which acknowledge that teaching media literacy in K-12 contexts is necessarily as frustrating, messy, and unpredictable as the media worlds with which young people themselves interact. In a true inquiry environment, all people with assumptions about popular culture—even, and perhaps especially, teachers—need to make room for new information and a variety of perspectives, perhaps especially those that make us most uncomfortable.

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