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Professional Resource: Resources from the Media Education Foundation

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The Media Education Foundation (MEF) was created shortly after executive director Sut Jhally received a cease and desist letter from the MTV networks.¹ Jhally edited together various MTV music videos for class demonstration in his introduction to mass communication course at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He then realized that other instructors could dually benefit from his compilation and began a small distribution of his video *Dreamworlds* (1991).² MTV caught word of the video and contacted Jhally with the cease and desist. He counteracted with a letter about his fair use rights of the videos for educational purposes, but Jhally said the university did not want to get caught up in the bureaucratic red tape. He then decided to separate his efforts from the university and created MEF.

Nineteen years later, MEF has over 100 films available for purchase on various topics related to media education. MEF produces the videos and DVDs “to inspire critical reflection on the social, political, and cultural impact of American mass media,” with focus on gender, health, race, commercialism, and other areas of culture.³ The videos and DVDs are available for use in college and high school classrooms (and in some cases middle school) to stimulate discussion about the influence of the ever-present media, according to Jhally.

A brief review of MEF’s catalog reveals a generous amount of films on heavy-handed, controversial topics such as the commercialization of childhood,⁴ misogyny in the media,⁵ and the glamorization of binge drinking.⁶ Film topics appear concentrated on the negative characteristics of mass media influence. The online synopsis of *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising’s Images of Women*, for example, states that the film “takes a fresh look at how advertising traffics in distorted and destructive ideals of femininity” and allows students to “think critically about popular culture and its relationship to sexism, eating disorders, and gender violence.”⁷

Paul Mihailidis, media studies professor at Hofstra University, argued that media literacy should not simply teach students to protect themselves from the media but should also allow students to examine the personal values and perspectives that individuals bring to media messages, to do more than just create cynicism toward the media.⁸ Mihailidis found that many of the students in an experimental media literacy group reported cynical views about the media’s influence on society and democracy, adopting a “highly defensive view, focused more on denouncing media functions than on critical reflection and discussion of why the media work as they do and to what end.”⁹ Media cynicism developed from media literacy education may, therefore, overshadow the intended formation of critical thinking skills.

While MEF’s intentions are to “inspire critical reflection,” if the films focus exclusively on the media’s negative political and cultural influence, they may predominantly produce media cynicism among its viewers. While a full examination of all MEF films is outside the scope of this review, to briefly explore how MEF covers media education, this review takes a critical examination at one of their newest films, *Consuming Kids: The Commercialization of Childhood* (2008).

Consuming Kids is a powerful 67-minute examination of the marketing strategies used by corporations to target their products to children and parents, including the “practices of a relentless multi-billion dollar marketing machine that now sells kids and their parents everything from junk food and violent video games to bogus educational products and the family car.”¹⁰ A bevy of experts speak on the issue of child marketing, including academic researchers, child advocates, psychiatrists, and youth marketers. The film examines the potential impact of child marketing, policy and advocacy implications, and governmental involvement in media regulations.

One of the most powerful messages in the film is the potential linkage between media exposure and childhood obesity. The film examines the public school systems to reveal mass commercialization, including advertising-supported radio on school buses and field trips to shopping malls. "There are so many ways that commercialism has intruded into our classrooms," said one of the film's experts, "There's Coke and Pepsi and Cadbury Schweppes in the schools, which are helping to generate an epidemic of childhood obesity among our kids across the country." The film makes the correlation between the overconsumption of junk food with children's exposure to the mass commercialization of such products.

Another compelling message is the impact media exposure may have on infant and toddler consumers, namely "educational media," such as Baby Einstein DVDs, that are touted to be important developmental tools for children. "The majority of parents think if they don't put their kids in front of media early and often, that they are going to be behind other kids," said one of the film's experts. The film discusses how research has yet to find any evidence that exposure to such media improves children's mental capabilities. The American Academy of Pediatrics, in fact, recommends that children under the age of 2 should not have any exposure to screen media.¹¹

While the film is highly engaging, it also appears fairly sensationalized, focusing on the most extreme examples of child marketing. Most of the experts are academics and advocates for marketing regulations, while few voices from the side of deregulation are heard. In most cases, when youth marketers or other marketing professionals are featured, they are ominously represented as "creepy"; at one point, youth marketers are even compared to pedophiles. Additionally, references are made at the end of the film linking exposure to child marketing with such ailments as bipolar disorder, ADHA, depression, diabetes, and hypertension, all of which may have truth behind them but are not completely justified in the film.

Despite the film's obvious bent toward media regulation and the negative impact of child marketing, the film is highly engaging and packed with many examples that viewers can critique and critically analyze. Given that MEF's goal is to general critical reflection, as long as the viewer keeps an open and critical mind, they should be able to gain more from the film than media cynicism. Teacher encouragement for critical thinking about the topic would also be imperative.

Given the vast array of topics covered and the multitude of accredited experts behind each film, MEF is overall an excellent teaching resource for media education. It is important, however, for media educators to remember that these films are resources with which to begin critical thinking. Students should also be encouraged to consider alternative arguments as well, to encourage true critical reflection. Another positive component of MEF is their ability to remain current and to update their films with timely examples and cultural references. One of MEF's newest releases, for example, is the fourth edition of a film about advertising to women, *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising's Image of Women* (2010).¹² MEF's apparent dedication to remain timely, relevant, and resourceful should assure media educators that they can rely on their materials and that their students will be highly engaged to reflect on the subject matter.

Notes

¹ As relayed by executive director Sut Jhally in the introductory video on the MEF website, at <http://www.mediaed.org/wp/about-mef>

² *Dreamworlds* (1991) was a film about representations of women, men, and sexuality in music videos. Since then, two more editions, in 1995 and 2007, were produced. For more information about the films, see http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/223/study-guide_223.pdf

³ See the mission statement in the About MEF section on the website, at <http://www.mediaed.org/wp/about-mef>

⁴ See *Consuming Kids: The Commercialization of Childhood* (2008) at <http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=134>

⁵ See *Generation M: Misogyny in Media and Culture* (2008) at <http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=234>

⁶ See *Spin the Bottle: Sex, Lies, & Alcohol* (2004) at <http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=210>

⁷ See the online synopsis at <http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=241>

⁸ Paul Mihailidis, "Beyond Cynicism: Media Education and Civic Learning Outcomes in the University," *International Journal of Learning and Media* 1 (2009): 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰ See <http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=134> for the full synopsis of the film.

¹¹ "Children, Adolescents, and Television," *Pediatrics* 107, no. 2 (2001): 423.

¹² See *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising's Image of Women* (2010) at <http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=241>