

# **Toward Critical Media Literacy: Moving Beyond Analysis and Evaluation<sup>1</sup>**

*by*  
*Muhammed Shahril Bin Shaik Abdullah*

‘The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.’

*Karl Marx*

## **Introduction**

The role of media in the area of mass communication and its relation as well as contribution, whether positive or negative, to social change has always been a subject of profound interest in the fields of media and cultural studies. The significant impact a media form has on a society, ‘whether rustic or urban, pre- or post-industrial’, is a fact that we cannot simply ignore, especially in our attempt to understand modern society in which ‘media form a large part of people’s lives, from billboards along highways, to radio programs, newspapers, magazines, films, and television.’<sup>2</sup>

With the constant burgeoning forms of new media spectacles being offered by the cultural industries for the consumption of the public, educators now have a greater and a more challenging role to play in cultivating critical thinking skills to ensure that students, as well as the public, are well equipped with the necessary intellectual tools to counter and criticize media stereotypes, values and ideologies, and are able to recognize and point out subtle media representations that could potentially intensify the problems of gender, racial and class inequalities and injustices within the social fabric.

## **The need for media literacy**

Media literacy education has not been accorded its due importance in our contemporary society, until recently. The possibility of the media, as we are told,

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at The Reading Group Sharing Session, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2007, Hjh Esah Cafeteria, Bussorah Street.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, K 2000, ‘*Television and Social Change in Rural India*’, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

becoming an instrument to transform an individual into a destructive element within the society has led the authorities to caution the public to be wary of ‘dangerous political agendas’ that are being disseminated through new media platforms, such as the Internet, as well as telling them to turn only to trusted and established sources for information.

On one hand, there is no way for anyone or anything to stop the proliferation of media technology from occupying our lives. We need to recognize the ubiquity of media culture in our society, the primary role of cultural forms such as television, film, popular music, advertising and the Internet along with their media representations in constructing our mental imaginations and understanding of the world. On the other hand, regulating access to the Internet and restricting the people to conform to particular sites which offer legitimate information that is considered safe for them to consume, will not solve the problem of individuals being exploited and manipulated by the those forces behind the media apparatus.

Beyond the current discourse on the problem of ‘self-radicalization’, educators and concerned citizens need to recognize the important role of education in creating an awareness of, or even teaching, media literacy for the purpose of sensitizing students and the public to the problems of gender, racial, and class inequalities and discrimination which have been greatly exacerbated by mainstream media. Teachers and educators have a great responsibility in creating awareness towards recognition of media misrepresentation and stereotyping, which requires the uncovering of the political and social construction of knowledge, making visible its power structure and how it benefits a few people more than others (Luke, 1994). Society needs to recognize and acknowledge the problem when dominant groups are freely given the avenue to do most of the representing, as in the case of media conglomerates, and when media messages are naturalized such that people are smothered of any critical thinking to question the social construction of the representations. As stated by Carmen Luke, “unless educators take a lead in developing appropriate pedagogies for these new electronic media and forms of communication, corporate experts will be the ones to determine how people will learn, what they learn, and what constitutes literacy” (2000, p. 71)

## A case study

It took less than a decade for Luke's prophecy to become an inevitable reality. We are presently in the midst of being dragged into the uncertain hype of incorporating cyber games as part of the curriculum in public schools. Neatly packaged and marketed to schools as an educational tool, *Granado Espada*, a fantasy role-playing game set in a detailed fictional game-world that mirrors the 17th century and the European colonialists' forays into the New World, has captured the interest of more than 35 schools that are planning to incorporate it into their lessons. With its distributors' persistent and widely publicized claims that the game will be useful for students to learn advanced IT skills, creativity and team building, it is no surprise that schools are eager to bring in the game as part of their curriculum. What is rather problematic is the corporations' ability to easily penetrate into and invade public spheres, such as schools, to pursue their economic interest. According to a newspaper report, the companies that brought in the game 'felt [that] the setting of the game's story was similar to that of Singapore's history', hence 'made it easier for elements of National Education (NE) to be incorporated into the game'. A deeper analysis, though, reveals the other side – the uglier side – of the coin. In a 2005 press release by Parks Associates, a market research and consulting firm, it is reported that 'online gaming revenues [will] triple by 2009'. Hence, no profit-driven corporation would want to be left out in this big business opportunity. Riding on the commitment of the government to imbue the values of National Education in schools have made it a lot easier for those corporations to conquer the 'school market'.

Applying the concepts of critical media literacy, we would easily be able to point out the stark discrepancies in the distributors' erroneous claims, and in turn challenge and question their real interest in pushing the game to schools. Being able to analyze critically the representation of images and decode the message that is entrenched in the medium will help us to recognize the kind of values and ideologies it will impart to the audience, and the mental and cultural holocaust it will create if the game is ever going to be consumed in schools. Let us take, for instance, a claim by the game's distributors that it is useful for National Education. A critical media literacy approach would refute it by pointing out the total absence in the game of any element related to National Education, right from its architecture, costume or even its characters. The entire setting is based on

'17th century and the European colonialists' forays into the New World', which itself is a negation of the first NE message which states: 'Singapore is our homeland. We treasure our heritage and take pride in shaping our own unique way of life.' The big question here is – why then are we depending on images of European colonialists, the very people who colonized our homeland, to educate our students on National Education?

Here is where educators need to step in and make it clear to the students about the principle of protecting one's homeland and culture, that it's not just about military defense but also to protect one's homeland and culture from the subtle invasion of foreign ideologies and influences that will corrupt the minds of our youth, that will ultimately uproot our very own cultural heritage and wash away whatever historical imagination that is left; ideologies which are hideously imported in to boost the revenues of those powers that be, sinisterly packaged and marketed to public schools as so-called tools to impart educational values.

### **Media as a cultural pedagogy**

Media culture (which includes, but not limited to, television, film, popular music, Internet) is a form of cultural pedagogy that teaches the accepted norms in society, accepted ways of thought and behavior, gender roles, values and cultural knowledge (Kellner, 2005). Individuals often do not realize that they are being educated and constructed by media culture due to its subtle and subliminal pedagogy that is usually invisible to the unsuspecting consumer. The media spectacle, with its wide range of dazzling aural and visual signifiers, embodies contemporary society's basic norms and values, and serves to enculturate individuals into its way of life, deeply influencing and molding their own thoughts and actions (Kellner 1995, 2003). As Debord pointed out in *The Society of the Spectacle*:

“When the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior. The spectacle as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally

finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs.”<sup>3</sup>

This is not to say that we are fully adopting the Situationist movement or the Frankfurt School pessimistic view on media and popular culture<sup>4</sup>, which suggest that it is beyond the power of the individual to resist any form of exploitation and manipulation by the culture industries. On the contrary, we do recognize the existence of diverse, and conflicting, social situations which allows for reader/viewers/listeners to adopt different stances when making sense of media and cultural texts. In *Policing the Crisis*, a key work by Stuart Hall *et al.* (1978), it is argued that, while mass media do tend to reproduce interpretations which serve the interest of the ruling class and hence reinforce those stereotypes and the conservative ideology that currently construct specific notions of race, gender and class, they are also a ‘field of ideological struggle’<sup>5</sup>. We have witnessed the emergence of counter-cultural movements who are constantly seeking to jam the culture, making use of the media itself as a tool to aggressively counter media prejudices. We need to be critical of how meanings, messages and values are constructed and imposed on audiences, especially when they promote certain ideologies that will benefit the privileged few while undermining the oppressed majority. But this critical stand will be of no value if it fails to translate itself into any form of social activism, in whatever way possible and however small it may be.

Within our own capacity to develop a learning environment that promotes participatory democracy by allowing students to openly and critically engage media and cultural texts with the use of critical media literacy, educators and public intellectuals need to take up a more proactive role in the ‘cultural battles that have been waged in current debates over what should be taught in schools, presented in the media, displayed in museum exhibitions, and housed in public libraries’<sup>6</sup>. We need to develop a certain amount of interest in areas such as ‘children’s culture, cultural studies and other progressive forms of social theory’, as lacking an interest in any of these ‘not only ignore the diverse spheres in which children become acculturated, they also surrender the responsibility to challenge increasing attempts by corporate moguls to reduce generations of children to consumers

---

<sup>3</sup> Debord G. 1967, *Society of the Spectacle*.

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Adorno T. & Horkheimer M. (1972) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Marcuse H. (1964) *One-Dimensional Man*.

<sup>5</sup> Hall, S *et al.* 1978, *Policing the Crisis*, Macmillan, London.

<sup>6</sup> Giroux H. 1995, *Animating youth: the Disnification of children’s culture*, *Socialist Review* 24:3, pp. 23-55.

for new commercial markets.’<sup>7</sup> In order to change the face of education ‘so that it becomes, once again, a site for the formation of values, of dignity and integrity, we would need to intervene in existing systems of representation’<sup>8</sup>.

This includes teaching the skills that will empower students and the public to resist media misrepresentations of ‘race, ethnicity, gender, class and other forms of cultural differences in order to empower individuals and promote democratization’<sup>9</sup>, and not merely stressing on the need to be conversant with media technologies in order to be proficient in the use of new tools for study, work, play and living. It is important for educators to recognize the need for the empowerment of students and the public to be involved in the production of meanings and representations, for ‘when groups often underrepresented or misrepresented in the media become investigators of their representations and creators of their own meanings, the learning process becomes an empowering expression of voice’<sup>10</sup>.

## Conclusion

Critical media literacy is necessary to help us analyze media codes and conventions as well as to criticize media stereotypes and dominant values and ideologies. It helps us to use media intelligently, to discriminate and evaluate media content, and to critically dissect media forms. Critical media literacy analyzes media culture as products of social production and struggle, teaching us to be critical of media representations and discourses, at the same time stressing the importance of learning to use the media as modes of self expression and social activism (Kellner 1995). It is the challenge of educators to develop strategies and methodologies to teach media literacy which takes on the comprehensive approach that would teach critical thinking skills and how to intelligently use the media as instruments of social change.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> bell hooks 1994, *Outlaw culture: resisting representations*, Routledge, New York.

<sup>9</sup> Kellner, D n.d., *Media literacies and critical pedagogy in a multicultural society*, <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner>

<sup>10</sup> Kellner, D & Share, J 2005, ‘Toward critical media literacy: Core concepts, debates organizations and policy’.

## Bibliography

1. Adorno, T 1972, *The culture industry*, Routledge, New York.
2. bell hooks 1994, *Outlaw culture: resisting representations*, Routledge, New York.
3. Debord, G 1967, *The society of the spectacle*, Zone Books, New York.
4. Giroux, H 2003, *The abandoned generation: democracy beyond the culture of fear*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
5. \_\_\_\_\_, *Doing cultural studies: youth and the challenge of pedagogy*.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ 1995, *Animating youth: the Disnification of children's culture*, *Socialist Review* 24:3, pp. 23-55.
7. Hall, S, Critcher, C, Jefferson, T, Clarke, J, Roberts, B 1978, *Policing the Crisis*, Macmillan, London.
8. Hall, S 1980, Encoding/decoding. In Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Ed.), *Culture, Media, Language*, Hutchinson, London.
9. Johnson, K 2000, *Television and social change in rural India*, Sage Publications, New Delhi.
10. Kellner, D & Share, J 2005, 'Toward critical media literacy: Core concepts, debates organizations and policy', in *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, Vol. 26, No. 3, September 2005, pp. 369-386.
11. Kellner, D n.d., *Media literacies and critical pedagogy in a multicultural society*, <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner>
12. \_\_\_\_\_ n.d., *Media culture and the triumph of the spectacle*.
13. \_\_\_\_\_ 1995, *Media culture: cultural studies, identity and politics between modern and the postmodern*, Routledge, London.
14. Marcuse, H 1964, *One-dimensional man*, Beacon Press, Boston.
15. Marx, K 1932, The german ideology, in R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx-Engels reader*, W. W. Norton, New York.
16. Steinert, H 2003, *Culture industry*, Polity Press, UK.