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# The film's the thing : investigating the use of visual media and the pedagogical approach of Ontario's media studies curriculum

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**THE FILM'S THE THING: INVESTIGATING THE USE OF VISUAL MEDIA  
AND THE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH OF ONTARIO'S MEDIA STUDIES  
CURRICULUM**

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by

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**B.A., McMaster University, 2006**

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**Presented to Ryerson University**

**in partial fulfillment of the**

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**in the program of**

**Communication and Culture**

**Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2008**

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# **THE FILM'S THE THING: INVESTIGATING THE USE OF VISUAL MEDIA AND THE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH OF ONTARIO'S MEDIA STUDIES CURRICULUM**

**Communication and Culture  
Ryerson University, 2008**

## **Abstract**

Media Studies now makes up one quarter of the mandatory English program curriculum for students, grades one through twelve, in the province of Ontario. Prompted by the recent changes in prescribed media requirements, this study explores the history and theory behind current Media Studies curriculum in Ontario to gain insight on how these ideals function in practice. More specifically, this study involved a qualitative analysis in three major parts: a genealogy of visual media and media education that explores the motivations behind the study of popular media; a discourse analysis of curricular texts that addresses current expectations for Grade Twelve media literacy; and finally, a critical ethnography of a Grade Twelve classroom in Toronto that provides examples of how the curriculum can be implemented when informed by critical pedagogy.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Dedication**

For Rose, Brian, and Matt who have each encouraged me to do and supported me through each moment of this undertaking.

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## INTRODUCTION

### To Be or Not to Be, That is the Question

In December 2007, I spent three weeks completing a critical ethnography on Media Studies in a grade twelve classroom. During my time with the class, the teacher's interest in exploring political and social issues was such that I was once too nervous to faithfully record their controversial conversation. The central text presented to the students was Michael Almereyda's filmic version of *Hamlet* (2000), and the class was discussing Hamlet's mental state during the infamous "To be or not to be" monologue. Some of the students had described Hamlet as being dark, confused, or mentally disturbed, based on his contemplation of suicide. The teacher, Katherine, disagreed, explaining

*will you explain this?*

I wish this presentation hadn't made him seem mad. I don't think it's crazy to want to commit suicide, to buckle under pressure. What does it mean to be a human? Becoming an adult is so much pressure, who wouldn't just want to sleep? But we know that when you sleep you can have nightmares. We really don't know what happens at the end of life, and that's why we put up with love, because we fear death. [To one of the student presenters] I really liked how you outlined all the issues in the video store. Who would deal with all these problems when you could just commit suicide? But he says we're afraid of what could be after death and we've certainly already seen some afterlife in this film. (Katherine, Field Notes, December 19, 2007)

Even though I was excited by this debate, I feared that if I faithfully copied what she said, the reader would not have the context and tone of her comments and may think that she was promoting suicide. I was surprised by this moment of political, controversial discussion and the teacher's commitment to openly explore such topics.

Later that day I met with a student who volunteered to interview with me about the media and media education. In my discussion with Aliyah (a pseudonym chosen by

the participant), I asked her to recall a moment from class that stuck out to her. Without hesitation, she recalled how important it was for her to discuss suicide:

In Hamlet, you know how he's struggling, because his troubles are so much, should he just commit suicide or should he face up to his fears? I think that's something that we can all really relate to, because it's a really stressful time right now so we're like, should we just forget everything? You know? So I think when that came up especially today in class, I was like, hey. That really relates to all of us and I'm happy we're talking about this so that we have some place to get rid of our tensions. Like, yeah, I feel that way too, you know? But all you have to do is head on, you'll get through it. (Aliyah, interview, December 19, 2007)

With this comment, Aliyah reminded me how important this moment was. Although it can be surprising to see such a controversial issue approached in a classroom, it is also important. The conversation around teen suicide was To Be.

These sorts of socio-political topics should not be avoided in favour of an illusion of "neutrality" or "political correctness." There has been much debate about the function of neutrality in education. One position argues that students and educators alike should be encouraged to remain objective by using objective literacy tools so as not to succumb to any privileged political ethos (Connelly, 2008). However, this position overlooks that the classroom or lecture hall is always already a political space, and any attempt to 'depoliticize' it is futile. Michel Foucault suggests that the language used, the silences, the architectural layout, rules of discipline and the whole internal organization of a school is a product of, and thus aligned to, the discourses of a given society (Foucault, 1978). Instead of neutrality, critical pedagogy encourages educators to meet political issues head-on and to create a dialogue with students. Joe L. Kincheloe (2005) summarizes that critical pedagogy treats education as inherently political, devoted to social change and cultivating intellect, interested in marginalized voices and multiple perspectives, and

places importance on understanding context (Kincheloe, 2005). Thus, critical pedagogy is a practice which seeks to highlight and debate political moments, rather than avoid controversial dialogues.

According to *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 11 and 12: English (Revised)* (2007) one of the “Media Studies” expectations is Critical Literacy. This opportunity in the Ontario curriculum supports the application of critical pedagogy in Media Studies. When paired with Media Studies, critical pedagogy can create moments such as the one enacted in Katherine’s class – moments in which students are able to publicly consider and debate teen suicide, for instance. In the same way that critical pedagogy can create spaces for considering students’ socio-political realities, media texts can highlight contemporary issues for the students to wrestle with. While Shakespeare’s original text includes the topic of suicide, Almereyda’s recent cinematic version was able to connect it to teenagers, a demographic that did not exist in Shakespeare’s era. This media text was able to ground the piece in the present, with characters that were relatable for the students. In doing so, this classroom was able to approach an important, current issue which was not necessarily evident in the original text. The introduction of media texts also troubles the traditional hierarchy of the high school English canon, by introducing popular entertainment as classroom texts. While it was once considered a cheating or lazy to rent a film in place of reading the book, Katherine (prompted by the Ontario curriculum) makes film central in an English class. In doing so, the students were more comfortable and confident reading familiar media texts, helping them to play an active role in their education. This helps to dissolve the structural hierarchy of teacher as

knowledge-bearer, which critical pedagogues suggest is important to create active future citizens.

This project is a marriage of my two central research interests: visual media and critical pedagogy. Visual media texts are an important and blossoming area of study. Visual media are key elements of leisure, yet also seem to have bled into every-day tasks -- how we get the weather, our experience in a public washroom, etc. Each year there are new ways to view and use visual media. Influenced by the disciplines of Cultural Studies, Critical Theory, Visual Culture, and Film studies, I see *education* as one element to consider when thinking about “the visual.” In many ways, youth and media culture are often connected. They are both new phenomena; as categories of study since the industrial revolution, and as growing and shifting objects of meaning. No one knows quite how to handle them, or what they can do. Henry Giroux writes that, “prohibited from speaking as moral and political agents, youth become an empty category inhabited by the desires, fantasies, and interests of the adult world” (Giroux, 1997). In the same way that the category of “youth” has varied connotations, depending on the context, “the media” can reflect social values. Youth and media are often vilified with the same stroke, at the same time as they can both be praised as potential revolutionaries. I chose to focus on Ontario’s Media Studies program, as it is a particularly rich topic of study being the first jurisdiction in North America to instill media education as a mandatory component of English in 1987. It has evolved in many ways, manifesting in 2006 as one quarter of mandatory English courses for grades one to twelve (media-awareness.com). In 2007, a revised English curriculum signals a distinct shift to “critical” Media Studies. Thus, this

study is an inquiry into critical media studies in Ontario, specifically for grade twelve students who are in their last required year of studying media.

In doing this research, I wanted to explore what was happening in the arena of media education, and how media are being taught. What motivates the an emphasis on media in English? What does media studies hope to achieve? How are media studies taught? What does “critical” mean (in the curriculum, for students, for teachers, for educational institutions) and how can it function? What will students teach about media?

In order to grapple with the realities of Media Studies in Ontario, I completed a two part study. First, I wanted to understand the expectations of Media Studies, or *what* was to be taught by examining curriculum and course texts. The wording and prescriptions of curricular documents have a direct relation to the experiences in the classroom. That is, their goal is to shape social realities by circumscribing the boundaries and requisites of the class space. I completed a critical discourse analysis of the curriculum and a provincially approved textbook in order to familiarize myself with the perspective of the program; what is expected of educators, what the guidelines are, what the definitions imply. Second, with an understanding of the curriculum, I hoped to *belay* the experiences of a class in order to understand *how* Media Studies was being taught in a classroom. Because critical pedagogy is a practice, I used a critical ethnography to understand how Media Studies and Critical Literacy could function in reality.

First, I ground this study in a literature review. In Chapter One I create a genealogy of media education, critical pedagogy, and their union. In creating a genealogy, I do not try to outline a “greatest hits” of historical moments and lead to a unified critical media education. Rather, I acknowledge that critical pedagogy and media

education have been influenced by a multitude of moments and exist now in many forms. Directed by the Ontario curriculum's focus on film and television, I outline a palimpsest of overlapping moments that relate to the development of these media, of media education and of various pedagogies. In the first two parts, I base the genealogy in articles from academic journals and relate them to various socio-political moments and realities. In the last section of the genealogy, I outline some theories and moments central to my perceptions and study.

Chapter Two is a critical discourse analysis of *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 11 and 12: English (Revised)* (2007) and a provincially approved text for a grade twelve, academic stream class, *Echoes 12: Fiction, Media and Non-Fiction* (2002). I examine what guidelines and practices educators are encouraged to use for Media Studies and Critical Literacy. The textbook offers insight into what students are presented for media education, including which media are incorporated, what sorts of questions are asked, and what socio-political issues are raised. I relate the findings of the discourse analysis to some issues and practices found in the genealogy in order to gain perspective on some of the program's influences. This chapter also grounds my critical ethnography (Chapter Four) by outlining the expectations of a Media Studies classroom.

In Chapter Three I outline my research methodology. Because ethnography provides a unique context and different challenges each time it is practiced, I contextualize the participants of the ethnography and explore the circumstances which led to my findings. I also chronicle the challenges of remaining "ethical" in contemporary educational research, as well as general notes from my experience in the field. Chapter Four explores some of the central moments of the ethnography and relates them to critical

pedagogy's call for political content, how the visual media texts functioned with critical pedagogy, and critical pedagogy as a practice. In doing so, I shed light on an example of Ontario's Media Studies project in practice.

Finally, Chapter Five discusses the unexplored issues of Media Studies and Critical Literacy that the study introduces and insights into how the program can be altered. I wonder how ambiguities in the curriculum can help or hinder the Media Studies program. I also explore the seeming contradiction of a radical pedagogy being practiced by an institution. Does education want critical students?



## CHAPTER ONE

### There are more things in heaven and earth, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy: A Genealogical Review

*In preparing for my time at Rosenguild Secondary, I'm overwhelmed by the seemingly increasing size of the field. The more I read the more material surfaces. There was a good quote a few days ago trying to tell me (I assume it was directed to me) "Mass communication is so big and so complex that it can never be collected into a neat body ... so relax."<sup>1</sup> That's all. Just, relax. (Field Notes, November 22, 2007)*

In order to begin to ask what is being taught in Media Studies, it is important to explore some motivations behind educating youth about media. In the following chapter, I sketch a genealogy of discourses and events that have shaped Ontario's project of Media Studies. According to Foucault (1977), genealogical research must replace traditional History, as the latter seeks to create a linear, totalizing narrative and conceal its foundation in domination and violence. Meanwhile genealogy "operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times" and "opposes itself to the search of origins" (Foucault, 1977, pp. 139-140). While the bias of History chronicles a limited number of important events, in a genealogy, the weight of innumerable moments ripples outward to shape present realities. Here, I hope to trace some of these ripples.

Since the curriculum focuses on the use of film and television in education (as explored in Chapter Two), I explore a constellation of moments, reactions, and uses of these popular media. As a methodology for this genealogy, I focus on academic journal articles from throughout the twentieth century for the first two sections. This method reflects the practice of genealogy as I am highlighting voices and reactions to media education rather than a summary of incidents. However, I try to secure these articles in

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<sup>1</sup> W. Boutwell, (1958) "Education for the Age of Communication". *The English Journal*, Vol 47, No 3.

various socio-political moments. Alongside these academic reactions I draw from a number of cultural theorists, research studies, socio-political events, contemporary art movements and shifting meanings around “youth” in order to complicate this genealogical palimpsest. In the final section of this review, I recall some theories and moments which grounded my perceptions and, thereby, this study.

## **I. The Devil Hath Power To Assume a Pleasing Shape: An Inoculate Approach to Film Education**

In order to trace academic responses to film in schools, I looked to one of the older, more prestigious education journals, *The Harvard Educational Review* (1930). The *Review* devoted its second issue to the matter of “the educational application of machines” (Wood, 1931, p. 49). Of the articles that discussed film as an emerging medium, all looked favorably on its inclusion into the classroom. Ben Wood (1931) argues that the products of the machine age should not be denounced as evil, but evil is dependant on the nature of people. He suggests that education must include the media of the times in order to ready students for their environment: “our teachers are living in the days of Henry Ford and are trying to prepare their pupils for the times of the village blacksmith” (Wood, 1931, p. 49). Cinematic technologies began to crystallize in the 1890s in tandem with the maturation of the Industrial Revolution in North America. As work and leisure hours were established, citizens began to take advantage of affordable new forms of entertainment such as kinoscope parlors and films shown in music halls which became widely available in America during 1905. By 1915, the first full feature silent films were commercially available, and feature films with sound arrived in 1927

(Altman, 1997; Wexman, 2006). Thus, in less than thirty years, film had become a pillar for the newfound institution of leisure, making Wood's argument seem apt.

In a subsequent article in the second edition of the *Review*, Thomas E. Finegan (1931) clarifies why film can be incorporated into the classroom. As a member of the "Eastman Teaching Films Inc.," Finegan reveals that an Eastman Kodak Company funded study shows that, when used as a visual teaching aid, students who watch educational film average higher test score than their anti-cinematic counterparts. And, since the (North) American taxpayers fund education, he believes that films should be used in classrooms because they are economically expedient.

Securing film as an economically sound investment was a necessity for educators. In the early 1900s, economist and social critic Simon N. Patten suggests that unless "the very Institutions of Civilization" – the library, the high school, and the church – effectively compete for the moments of leisure time, the masses would look to ludicrous entertainment for their "gratification and knowledge" (Patten, 1909). This statement reveals a few assumptions: cultural and social institutions must function like businesses insofar as they give central consideration to economic strategies in order to remain competitive; and that the activities of leisure time – including film – were considered to lack substance and needed reputable qualification. Finegan was also writing during The Great Depression of the 1930s, which undoubtedly contributed to a need to qualify film in terms of economic logic.

As for the content of classroom film, Finegan carves a clear distinction between pleasure and learning, in explaining that "the work of the classroom is to *instruct*. It is not to entertain or amuse" (Finegan, 1931, p. 52). Therefore, he believed classroom films

should include “basic features only, essential to fundamental knowledge,” a positive perspective on the subject, an “ethical viewpoint” so as not to shock students with “sensitive nervous systems,” and should not use sound so that students must discover the answers for themselves (Finegan, 1931, p. 53). In a later article in the *Review* issue, John Haeseler (1931) disagrees with Finegan on film sound, suggesting that “words properly spoken by the human voice are more forceful than the printed word” and thereby more effective to “charm” the students (Haeseler, 1931, p. 63). This discussion on film sound was the first of its kind, as sound films were first introduced with the *Jazz Singer* in 1927. Whereas Haeseler sees the “charms” of film as working for the educator, many more feared that the sensory experience of cinema was manipulating youth.

Although psychologist Hugo Munsterberg (1916) once “felt it as undignified for a Harvard professor to attend a moving picture show” (Langdale, 2001, p. 7), he suggested that the medium of film was unique in its ability to mimic and combine memory, emotion and human psychology. He contrasts theatre with film and attests that narrative techniques distinct to cinema, such as “flash-backs” and “close-up” allow the film world to flow as freely as our own consciousness:

In both cases, the act which in the ordinary theater would go on in our mind alone is here in the photoplay projected into the pictures themselves. It is as if reality has lost its own continuous connection and become shaped by the demands of our soul. It is as if the outer world itself became molded in accordance with our fleeting turns of attention or with our passing memory ideas. (1916)

Yet while Munsterberg marveled at the relations between film and consciousness, others feared that its ability to connect and reflect our consciousness would lead to the manipulation of youth and threaten the future of American culture. Champion of high

modernist literature F.R. Leavis<sup>2</sup> (1930) was certain that “films have a so much more [sic] potent influence” and that “it would be difficult to dispute that the result [of films] must be serious damage to the ‘standard of living’” (p. 14). In order to avoid moral and social disintegration, Leavis believed that the ‘cultured,’ upper-class minority must protect and educate their easily duped, working-class counterparts. In arguing this in *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, Leavis references Matthew Arnold (1869), who believes that “besides the pleasure of being wealthy and comfortable, they will have authentic recognition as vessels of sweetness and light” (Arnold, p. 78). That is, Arnold and Leavis call on the bourgeois to save culture from the ignorance of the working class and the tyranny of change.

The turn of the century was a volatile time. The excitement of new technological invention and increased quality of life clashed with the complexities of World War I (1914-18), the Russian Revolution (1917), a worldwide flu pandemic killing 22 million (1918-1920), Italian fascism (1922), the growing isolation of the proletariat, and the Great Depression (1929). New ideas were threatening traditional epistemologies, ushered by the four horsemen of the Modernist apocalypse: Karl Marx (1848), Charles Darwin (1859), Sigmund Freud (1900), and Albert Einstein (1905). Concurrent with the drastic socio-economic and political upheavals around the turn of the century, the social value of childhood and children was also shifting. As North America became increasingly industrialized in the late nineteenth century, leaving behind its agricultural roots, the role of child as labourer was replaced by a more sacred, symbolic function (Rotman Zelizer, 1983, 1994; Mickenberg, 2006). Julia L. Mickenberg (2006) writes that the new,

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that Leavis is credited for the foundation of Media Education in Britain with his influential book *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (1933).

'priceless' child was also increasingly studied, codified, regulated, and protected through the new fields of paediatrics and child psychology, new agencies devoted to child welfare such as the Children's Bureau (established in 1912), and the rise of compulsory schooling, child study programs, and "scientific" regimes of parenting. (pg 1218)

In shifting from agricultural labourer to precious gift, children became *something* to protect during a moment when society seemed to be propelling itself into a new and frightening era. And with the creation of childhood, altered other categories of identity: fatherhood, motherhood, and adolescence, or youth.

However this does not mean that youth were not also blamed for the ills of society. In an editorial Charles Swain Thomas (1935), editor of the Fifth Volume of the *Harvard Educational Review*, recalls an exchange between some academics on the topic of youth. One professor declared that youth are the real problems of society in that they "desire to find short cuts to happiness" and are unwilling to work (Thomas, 1935, p. 5). He goes on to blame the influences of the home for not having standards, the church for not having backbone and the school for having "soft pedagogy." Another professor responds by drawing attention to the economic stress of the (then current) Great Depression leaving few jobs for young men. He suggests that it is their generation's greed that has led them to the depression, not the lack of drive in youth: "We must stop thinking of how to make more things ... and begin to think of how to arrange our affairs so that men can live more safely, sanely and successfully" (Thomas, 1935, p. 6). These two contrasting opinions of youth seem to be prevalent in the studies on the effects of film on youth. In one moment youth are vilified as being indulgent in lower-class, debase media entertainment, and at another there is a call for film education in order to protect youth and the future.

As excitement mixed with anxiety in response to the rapidly shifting cultural terrain, a moral panic seemed to grip the hearts and minds of North Americans. To be clear, a moral panic can be identified when

a condition, episode, person or group emerges to be come defined as a threat to social values and interests ... the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to. (Cohen, 1972)

One such social panic can be linked to the fear of influence cinema had on youth. This fear produced 'moral barricades,' expert diagnoses and the inevitable solution of film education. Some of the first sociological studies were implemented to measure the damage of the "popular" on culture. However, in order to do so, these studies had to be legitimated by science and progress. In the 1920s, the Chicago School established new communication technologies as an integral part of the study of society: "From the point of view of sociology social evolution might profitably be studied in its relation to the development and perfection of the means and technique of communication" (Park & Burgess, 1921). Thus by legitimizing the study of communication technologies as a worthy academic pursuit, new and exciting conclusions could be made. Robert Ezra Park and Ernest W. Burgess suggested that media, which interacted through the senses, was in part "suggestive of the subtle, unconscious, yet profound ways in which personal attitudes are formed" (Park & Burgess, 1921). Aligned with this conception of media is the "Middletown" study enacted by Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd; the first of its kind to employ sociological field research to record and analyse a society in flux. Funded by John D. Rockefeller's Institute of Social and Religious research, the two lived with and studied residents of Muncie, Indiana; a town with few "natural beauty spots" where "man

must find thrills in other things, perhaps travel, print, radio, or movie” (Lynd & Lynd, 1929). Throughout the study the investigators lament the lack of religious servitude, diminishment of reading and intellectual culture, and the disappearance of community-building events. In their place, they see popular media, such as film, “bringing about early ‘sophistication’ of the young” by luring youth “under the spell of the powerful conditioning medium ... heightening of the emotional content, and the added factor of sharing this experience with a ‘date’ in the darkened room” (Lynd & Lynd, 1929). Unlike Leavis and Patten, Lynd & Lynd do not link the popular media to the working class. They note that “worker’s habits [tend] to lag roughly a generation behind those of the business class” and explicitly link films to juvenile delinquency (Lynd & Lynd, 1929). It is interesting that the very people that Leavis believes should protect culture are found in movie houses by Lynd and Lynd. What would this mean for culture?

Similar research is done in the Payne Fund Studies (PFS) which were commissioned to scientifically reveal the effects of film on youth. Organized in 1929 by the director of the Motion Picture Research Council, William H. Short, the study was to be the most vast and rigorous of its time by utilizing social scientists from multiple academic fields (the first multi-disciplinary study of its kind). At the onset, the PFS “wished to be seen as sponsoring work that contributed to research ... [rather than] being drawn into politically colored or controversial action” (Jowett et al, 1996). However, the biases of each scientist ultimately created contradictory conclusions, and the studies aligned with the moral panic around cinema rose to prominence. In relation to the studies, the most widely read publication was novelist Henry James Foreman’s interpretation of the PFS entitled *Our Movie Made Children*. Published in 1932 – a year prior to the other



seven PFS volumes – it was meant to be a “digestible” version of the studies. He paints film as a monstrous Pied Piper who will inevitably lead the enchanted children astray, and uses the scientific data of the study to prove his claims. After its release, many of the PFS scientists denounced the biases of Foreman suggesting that “being so anti-movie ... the manuscript [does not] interpret the position of the investigators” (Jowett et al, 1996). So while the public digested Foreman’s simplistic analysis of the degradation of youth, the academic integrity of the studies imploded as its members began to oppose each other. Nonetheless, the Payne Fund is regarded as being “responsible for the U.S. branch of a worldwide movement in the 1930s that sought to provide schoolchildren with enough understanding to discount the glamour and ‘false’ attractiveness of the movies” (Jowett et al, 1996). After the PFS, Short outlined several goals for film and education in the October 1934 issue of *Education*. In tandem with his suggestion to use film as a medium for education, echoing Wood, Finegan and Haeseler, Short hoped to foster “motion picture appreciation” (Jowett et al, 1996). That is, they intended to teach children the *proper* way to react to media, what to enjoy and how to enjoy it. And in doing so, students would be safe-guarded from enjoying popular media in a incorrect, vulgar way. Contemporary theorists of media education consider this paradigm of education as an “inoculation” approach (Halloran and Jones, 1968; Masterman 1980; Buckingham 2003). That is, children are assumed as unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy and must be protected to the harmful affect of mass media (film) which will infect the viewer’s sensibilities. In doing so, the children should be ultimately guided toward the “authentic values of great art and literature” and the “self-evident merits of ‘high’ culture” (Buckingham, 2003). Thus, the early roots of Media Studies cannot be

considered independently of the aforementioned zeitgeist of the early twentieth century. Media education, with roots firmly grounded in a class based understanding of culture and value, was initially intended to arm impressionable youth against the evils of popular media.

However, no moment is homogenous, and there were still those who defended film, culture, and media education. Franklin J. Keller (1933) writes in the *Harvard Review* that people should not worry about industry's effects on culture, for what could be more *cultural* than having the ability to reproduce cultural artifacts ad infinitum? Keller's excitement for the cultural democracy introduced by mechanical reproduction is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). Benjamin suggests that since mechanical products such as film and photography do not have an original, art can be freed from the oppression of "aura": the imposed spiritual worth of traditional art pieces, typically only enjoyed by the elite. In the place of the ritualistic cult of beauty, art could be realized as political and for the masses. Writing as a German Jew who would not escape Nazi capture, Benjamin realized that political art could be used for Fascist ends, but hoped that film could awaken the masses to become critically and politically aware. His call to consider film as a political space would not be popularized in the education realm until a few decades later in North America. Similarly, Keller and Benjamin's attitudes toward film as an exciting democratization of the arts also was not popular for some time.

Keller warns that two conditions must be met in order for everyone to enjoy cultural arts: "the humblest man must have enough money to purchase them; and he must have enough appreciation to enjoy them. The first condition can be met only by economic

readjustment; the second by education” (Keller, 1933, pg. 149). In order for industrial culture to be fully and democratically enjoyed, he believes that students must be properly educated in the appreciation of such arts as film. Thus, while Short and Keller both advocate inoculating students with a proper film appreciation through education, Keller does not align himself with the notion that mechanical reproduction necessarily demeans culture.

Believing mechanical reproduction as an artistic advancement, Keller writes that “as mechanical perfection increases, the nearer is the approach to artistic fidelity” (Keller, 1933, p. 147). This comment is interesting considering the various art movements that erupt in the time leading up to Keller’s assertion. With the seeming artistic fidelity of photography and, later, moving pictures, artists reacted by avoiding realism altogether. The early 1900s saw the explosive colours of the Fauves (1905), the multiperspectival Cubists (1907), the enthusiastic Futurists (1909), the nihilism of the Dadaist (1916) and the phantasmagoric Surrealists (1924) (Schneider Adams, 2002). I find it interesting that while Keller praises the artistic fidelity of mechanical reproduction, that the modern art world paints a different view. Here, Keller plays a useful devil’s advocate. While some of his assumptions seemed to agree that students must be inoculated, his other arguments suggest that there were still many competing and legitimate ways to view culture, film and society in the early twentieth century.

Early media education can be connected to the moral panic around new technologies, working-class culture, newfound leisure time, political upheavals, and modern (e)valuation of childhood. Film is pinpointed as a causation of degeneracy which is sometimes linked to the failures of the working-class culture (Leavis [1930], Patten

[1910]) and associated with the prematurely ‘sophisticated’ youth (Lynd & Lynd [1929], PFS [1933]). When advocates support the inclusion of film in education, it is done so on the grounds of economic and efficiency concerns, or in order to teach a class-based, predetermined “appreciation.” Film education done at this time was centrally concerned with indoctrinating youth with proper appreciation skills.

## **II. There is Nothing Either Good or Bad, But Thinking Makes it so: Media Education in Ontario**

Studying the content of popular media was popularly introduced in Ontario in the early 1960s. This new shift does not necessarily mean that educators were comfortable with media. Predominantly, the growing popularity of television contributed to feelings of urgency around studying media and their effects, similar to the moral panic around film. However, many things had changed since the discussions around film education in the 1930s, and it remains important to consider various socio-political moments, from multiple perspectives, when contextualizing the new media education policy.

The inclusion of media in English education can be traced in *The English Journal* (1912), one of the oldest English focused education journals. In it, William D. Boutwell (1958) makes an enthusiastic plea for the inclusion of popular mass media into English programs. English is the perfect home for media education, he believes, as much of the English teacher’s understanding of genre, plot, and general rules of fiction can easily be applied to new media forms since “all the media of mass communication are lengthening shadows of the older arts” (Boutwell, 1958, p. 140). This assumption that any text should be read according to the tradition of English continues today (Chapter Two). He makes clear that such a request is not so that students learn how to “kick out mass

communication,” but rather “to teach the coming generation how to be masters, not slaves, of mass media” (Boutwell, 1958, p. 138-139). And in understanding media, which according to Boutwell also includes an understanding of the political economy of mass communications, educators can arm students with the skill of a critic, perhaps one day raising the (low) standards of media content. Boutwell’s call for media education reveals some shifts in thinking. He sees more opportunity for media than being mere tools of the classroom, instead believing that popular and high culture content should be taught in tandem. However, it should be noted that he still identifies popular media as being manipulative. If students do not “master” them, media texts are sure to control students. The inclusion of media in English classrooms is largely to gain mastery over them by knowing them.

Writing at a similar time, the Frankfurt School members Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were skeptical of media technologies, believing that mass media was draining artistic integrity from a once rich culture. In their infamous article “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1947) they accuse the media of manufacturing a ready-made culture used to dominate and tranquilize the masses: “What is not mentioned is that the basis on which technology is gaining power over society is the power of those whose economic position is the strongest. Technical rationality today is the rationality of domination” (Adorno, 2006). From a Marxist perspective, they see ‘mass media’ as the reason for the proletariat’s continuing domination by the ruling classes. In doing so, they inevitably maintain the 1930’s moral panic of “popular culture” as necessarily evil; or at least they consider media texts manipulative.

Similar to Adorno and Horkheimer, educator Betty Levin (1950) suggested that popular television programming was a negative influence on youth, and did not support the marriage of media education and school as advocated by Boutwell. Like many of her film education predecessors, Levin concedes that television can be a useful tool to broadcast specially designed educational programming. However she suggests that popular television programs are unwholesome, affect the mental and physical health of youth by encouraging laziness, threaten to take the place of the family, and could lead to a more passive society (Levin, 1950). In response to Frank Stanton (1949), president of CBS Broadcasting System, who argued that television would encourage democracy by replacing the centralization and impersonalization of national politics, Levin asserts that any democratic potential will be compromised by the commercial nature of television. She writes that “business is good for business ... this is the first thing that a television executive must know” (Levin, 1950, p. 257). The crassness of commercialization is at the root of the television for Levin, and for this reason, she believes it to be a cultural ailment that the classroom can do without.

At the time Levin and Boutwell were writing, television was undergoing a new commercial explosion. Television had been dabbled with since the late nineteenth century, and, like most new technologies, was introduced to society several times in several forms. Laurie Schneider Adams (2002) claims that it was invented in 1925, while Ray Monfort (1949) suggests that in 1934, P.T. Farnsworth and V.K. Zworykin established the first all-electronic scanning systems, followed by TV production plants in 1936. Canada finally went “on the air” with stations in Montreal on September 6, 1952 and in Toronto two days later (Stewart, 1986). This is not to say that Canadians did not

have television before this. By 1951, there were five American networks broadcasting internationally (NBC, CBS, ABC, Westinghouse and DuMont) and over twelve million televisions in circulation (Stewart, 1986). The obvious gap between mass television production in 1936 and the maturation of television in the 1950s can be explained by the North American involvement in WWII. In fact, “the attack on Pearl Harbour by the Japanese on December 7, 1941, quickly put a halt to most television programming in the United States” (Abramson, 2002). Television has an intimate relationship with war. While Farnsworth and Zworykin were establishing commercial television, they were simultaneously submitting “secret proposals” to the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and the American government proposing potential military equipment such as missiles guided by television (Abramson, 2002). This technology was completed and functional by 1940, and its possibilities became explored for multiple militaristic aims.

The television medium would not only have a technological connection with war, but some of the early Communication Studies theorists were employed by the American government in war efforts. During WWII, Wilbur Schramm joined the “Office of War Information” and proceeded to conduct numerous academic studies into the effects of communications media, particularly propaganda (Chaffee, 1988). Largely considered the first communications theorist, he grounds communication studies in quantitative research in *The Process and Effect of Mass Communication* (1954). In it he argues – through the use of many diagrams – that the communication process is complex, and that media cannot be considered completely totalitarian. For example, on the topic of children and violence Schramm suggests that while there is a “great deal of violence in mass communication content today,” nonetheless “personality, situation and group influence

... will determine the use made of the message” (Schramm, 1954). Thus rather than assume the child as *tubula rasa*, Schramm identifies that children’s social and familiar contexts may contribute in their response to the media. Still, he notes that children without proper up-bringing would likely be without a solid moral foundation, and therefore more susceptible to immoral images.

Schramm’s text was used in early drafts of media education. In *The Journal of Communication*, Richard Braddock (1956) maps out why media education is important and how to run such an innovative program using Schramm. Braddock adds to Stanton (1949) and Levin’s (1950) discussion around democracy, and suggests that democratic citizenship can only be achieved if students are taught “critical reception” for all media – print and electronic. In using the term “critical” he refers to creating critics and cultivating taste; “the lives of many young people might be enriched if they learned how to cultivate taste for quality magazine stories and artistic radio, television, and film dramas” (Braddock, 1956, p. 56). Braddock’s conception of critical relates to the early film educator’s call for film appreciation. In order to teach this media education course, Braddock assigned and quizzed students on selected readings from Schramm’s *Mass Communications* (1949) and *The Process and Effect of Mass Communications* (1954) according with a different media form studied in each unit. The media units lasted from four to eight days, depending on the depth that Braddock believed each medium required; ordered from the least amount of time to the most, the units included advertising, “responsible use of mass media,” “mass media for education,” magazines, newspapers, radio, and film. Notably absent Braddock’s media education course was the study of television. He did not note its absence. Unlike Levin, he did not banish the possibility of



television in education; it seems that it was not a central medium to consider. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1966) suggests that media seem overwhelming when they are too new. He writes, “Now that TV is an environmental force, we are free to be nostalgic about the glorious artistic achievements of the movie” (McLuhan, 1966, p.34). Here, McLuhan is discussing television ten years after Braddock attempts to outline a media education course. Perhaps the added years of television popularity provided McLuhan his contemporaries of the 1960s enough time to want to understand the medium.

The academic journals of the 1960s increasingly entertained media education, and included television. It seems that from a Canadian perspective, this shift was influenced by new conceptions of pedagogy. In *The English Quarterly* (1968), published by the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, Douglas Barnes asserts that English was changing pedagogically and therefore canonically. The focus of teaching had shifted away from indoctrinating students with “appreciation” of texts, since this method assumed a hierarchy of class-based taste. He writes that “Culture seemed to be in the possession of a high-status group ... [defining] not only [student’s] accents and dialect, but what books they read, and what they said about them” (Barnes, 1968, p. 105). Like Leavis, Barnes realizes that culture can be entrusted in the hands of the bourgeois, yet, unlike Leavis, he sees this as the problem: “The outsider who wished to join the high-status group had to take over their ‘culture’” (Barnes, 1968, p.105). By shifting education away from Appreciation, and *knowing* the story (“since all of these imply ‘right answers’ and the need to ‘know about’”), language skills became the foundation of English (Barnes, 1968, p.106). By acknowledging a hierarchy of class texts, educators soon

avoided classic canonical texts, “because everybody ought to know them,” and departments began agreeing upon texts based on what the students could relate to at that particular moment. This conception of class, texts and education created more opportunity for validating popular media texts as important by de-centering canonical texts. Unlike Braddock who hoped to educate on media texts in order to inoculate students, Barnes signals the possibility that media content can simply be taught if meaningful.

This new view on educational content echoes the cultural theory of the Birmingham School (1964). In contrast to the Frankfurt School’s perception of media and popular culture, Birmingham theorists supplied a re-thinking of culture, value and education in the burgeoning field of Cultural Studies. Rather than being grounded in a recognized or scientific scholarly discourse, such as psychology, literary studies, or economics, Cultural Studies is inter-disciplinary and multi-methodological, and considers non-traditional and ‘low-brow’ texts valid subjects of inquiry. Founders Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E.P. Thompson were raised in working-class families, and extended the validity of academic critique to working-class life, broadening the definition of culture and history (O’Brien & Szeman, 2004). Williams explains that “in society as a whole, and in all its particular activities, the cultural tradition can be seen as a continual selection and re-selection of ancestors” (Williams, 1961). That is, Williams seeks to acknowledge that the “high points” of culture and history are not objective or necessarily superior, but rather that culture and history are subjective choices based on socio-economic distinctions of taste. The Birmingham School sought to promote popular media culture as worthy and necessary of study. However, it is noted that they may not

have fully broken with the Frankfurt School's critique of culture; while they did not hold disdain for mass culture, they were weary of the 'processed' culture industry as outlined by Adorno and Horkheimer, and hunted instead within mass culture for value and a better understanding of it (O'Brien & Szeman, 2004).

Another founding theorist of the Birmingham School, Stuart Hall presented an innovative treatment of media content and reception. In line with Adorno and Horkheimer, Hall concedes that media is certainly imbued with hegemonic ideologies which seek to maintain societal norms and values. However, he suggests that the media audience also maintains agency by negotiating the meanings within media texts: "decoding within the *negotiated version* contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of hegemonic definitions ... [while] it makes its own ground rules" (Hall, 1973). Thus, in contrast with previous conceptions of media effects, Hall grants agency to the subject. Connections can be made between Hall and Schramm on the subject of media "de-coding"; however while Schramm attributes agency only to subjects with an "upstanding" moral background, Hall supposes agency as inherent in the process of communication.

During the same period of the 1960s, theorist Marshall McLuhan shifted the focus of media studies from the effects of media content to the complexities of interaction with media forms. His famous phrase, "the medium is the message" reconsiders the ways in which media tools and technologies alter human processes: "What we are considering here, however, are the psychic and social consequences of the designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes" (McLuhan, 1964). The point of technology, according to McLuhan, is the change in scale, pace or pattern it introduces to human

affairs. He suggests that new media technologies penetrate to the nervous system of society, the effects of which must be examined with each new innovation. He insisted a radical re-thinking about the shift from a society largely based in mechanical production to an electronic, information society. McLuhan did not ignore the content of media, per se. He was interested in the relationship, or interaction, between content and media, media and environment, figure and ground. McLuhan explores the concept of figure and ground in his textbook for high school media education, *City as Classroom*:

*Understanding Language and Media* (1977). He designs the text to encourage students to exercise their understanding of context: “the interaction between the object, or *figure*, and its ground enables one to experience meaning which is the relation of the situation to oneself” (McLuhan, 1977, p.16). He instructs the students/readers to extend this method of criticism to a wide variety of technology and communication media, including obscure articles such as light bulbs, money and media trials. This book reveals his ongoing project of contextualization, as well as a dedication to media as a worthy and necessary subject of inquiry comparable to that of the Birmingham School.

The academic journal, *Educator's Guide to Media and Methods* (1966) was notably influenced by McLuhan's conception of media effects. Originally the *School Paperback Journal* (1964-1966), it focused exclusively on media education and cites McLuhan's work throughout. In a piece entitled *Three Thinkers for the Generation Gap*, Jeffery J. Schrank (1968) used McLuhan's ideas to explore why there seemed to be a rapidly widening gap between generations in the 1960s. He suggests that since media technologies help shape the consciousness of users, and the youth were more apt to be electronic media users, adults and youth were using different thought processes. Citing

McLuhan, Schrank notes that adults were raised in a print-based society, which has shaped them to be linear-thinking, private, individualistic and emotionally detached according to the process of reading. In contrast, youth were fragmented, social, emotional, non-conformist, and “want involvement and participation instead of detachment and mere viewpoint” (Schrank, 1968, p. 14). This observation was meant to stimulate teachers to ‘get with the times’ and explore media education, as well as an attempt to solve this perceived burgeoning crisis – the “generation gap”.

Schrank’s article was published in May, 1968, a moment of uprising and youth rebellion. In France during May of 1968, students protested in response to the control of the De Gaulle government. Although De Gaulle was eventually re-elected, the student strike highlighted concerns of social equality and human rights. This sort of youth protest was not unique to France, but rather North America was also undergoing some dramatic socio-political upheavals. After WWII, soldiers returned to find competent women successfully inhabiting traditionally male vocations. Simultaneously, scientific advancements led to the creation of the Birth Control Pill (1957), which arguably liberated women from the task of reproduction. The early 1960s saw women strive to gain economic, sexual and symbolic freedom in what is now known as “Women’s Liberation” or “Second Wave Feminism,” which often took the form of rebellious protests. Simultaneously, Black citizens, who had fought equally in the war, were also making strides in social and political arenas. Although the mid-50s experienced the ban of racially segregated schools, residual racisms were evident in North American policies, practices and cultures. “Black Power” groups formed, such as the Black Panthers, to insist upon non-discrimination laws against discriminatory employment practices, voting

laws, housing markets, and symbolic equality. Again, rallies such as the Million Man March led by Martin Luther King Jr. were used as methods to raise awareness. While sexual politics gained momentum after WWII, the Stonewall Riot of 1969 brought mass attention to the status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered citizens' rights in North America. Student movements protesting the Vietnam War also erupted in early 1960s, which found form on American university campuses. As youth and young adults were largely involved themselves in these socio-political causes, it is not surprising that educational theorists identified a tension between generations.

Published in the same May 1968 issue of *Media And Methods*, editor Frank McLaughlin asserts that the "never-trust-anyone-over-30 syndrome" of the 1960s was warranted. He believes films such as *The Graduate* and the music of The Beatles, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez "reflects the young person's sense of absurdity when confronted with the adult's world he's asked to join" (McLaughlin, 1968, p. 10). After suggesting that the adult is a "prisoner of his own perceptions," McLaughlin insists that the idea of "teacher as authority" must be laid to rest "in its proper grave – the middle ages" (McLaughlin, 1968, p. 62). The message of this article is repeated several times throughout *Media and Methods*, just as it was hinted at in *The English Quarterly*. In a stark contrast to the educators of the 1930s, student's opinions and needs were to be the focus of education, rather than what adults, and specifically educators, *thought* students needed.

According to an increasing number of educational theorists, what students wanted and needed was media education. 'Screen theory' helped to establish methods for media education. Developed in the pages of prominent journals *Screen* (1969) and *Screen*

*Education* (1959), theorists began utilizing diverse theories in order to deconstruct media texts; semiotics, psychoanalysis, Marxism and ideology, structuralism, post-structuralism, etc. (Buckingham, 2003). Teachers became enthusiastic about introducing these types of analysis to students at a comprehensible level. An example is seen in Umberto Eco's "Can Television Teach" where he applies general semiotics and theories of encoding and decoding (1979). In it he suggests the education of televisual language for children, including how to read irony, sarcasm, musical cues, and erotic codes in order to be more critical, informed viewers: "don't switch off television, switch on your critical freedom" (Eco, 1979). Len Masterman is widely recognized for applying some complex cultural theories, such as semiotics, ideology and representation, to instructional guides for media education (1980, 1985). By applying semiotics and exposing the political economy of media industries, Masterman hoped students could objectively analyse media in order to reveal 'common sense' ideologies. In doing so, Masterman hoped to reveal media processes: "*Discrimination* on the ground of cultural value was thus effectively replaced by a form of political or ideological *demystification*" (Buckingham, 2003).

Complementary to the theoretical approach of Screen Theory, other educators were attempting to define a visual language for discussing media in education. In *Media and Methods*, Jack Debes (1968) outlines the possibilities of a purely visual language that provides a unique method for sharing experiences. For Debes, using a visual language for expression encourages creativity, allows a person to re-examine the complexities of familiar contexts, reveal implicit meaning that can be lost in activities and create new meanings for inanimate objects (Debes, 1968). In contrast to Boutwell, who believed that media should be read like traditional literature texts, Debes considers visual texts to be

unique. This recognition of different media languages can be found in contemporary Media Studies curriculum (See Chapter Three), though still seems to lack succinct parameters for the different modes of reading. Notably, Debes is recognized as pioneering the term and field of “Visual Literacy.” An executive with the Kodak Corporation in Rochester, he was instrumental in “organizing an international forum for the emergent field and invited researches, instructional designers, educators and artists to form the International Visual Literacy Conference (1968). The Visual Literacy pioneers are sometimes referred to as the ‘Rochester School’” (Tyner, 1998, p.105). I was surprised to learn that the field of visual literacy was founded in the late 1960s. It seems that Visual Culture studies are still contesting the terrain. Due to its relatively inclusive, interdisciplinary nature, it is dangerous to consider visual culture as having no boundaries or to believe it lacks any specific objects of study. James D. Herbert believes that visual culture “forges an important bridge with material culture studies” where as, more openly, W.J.T. Mitchell suggests that the “cultural construction of visual experience of everyday life” can include landscapes, the unseen and the process of (un)seeing (Dikovitskaya, 2006, pp.55-57). In her book *Visual Culture* (2006), which seeks to explore and characterize the field, Margaret Dikovitskaya describes visual culture as “a field for the study of both the social construction of the visual (visual images, visual experiences) and the visual construction of the social, which apprehends the visual as a place for examining the social mechanisms of differentiation” (Dikovitskaya, 2006, p.58). It seems that Visual Culture is more inclusive than Art history or Film studies, and more ocular-centric than Cultural Studies or Sociology. Nonetheless, it is still considered a budding field, even with its roots in the late 1960s.



While visual literacy provided an innovative way to think about the visual media texts, Ontario implemented media texts under the banner of “media education.” Although there is no outright explanation for the choice in terminology by the curriculum, it seems that media points to less abstract subjects of inquiry and therefore more adaptable in a classroom setting. In Ontario, media education was temporarily enacted from 1966 until 1971 (Duncan, 1996; Hanmore, 2005). Seeing as this was the first North American movement toward media as the subject of education, there were multiple influences and methodologies. Tessa Hanmore notes that the first wave of media education typically is aligned to the inoculist approach of the 1940s (Hanmore, 2005). Much of the introduction to media education in Ontario retained the perspective that students were to be protected against the dangers of popular media. However, at the same time these teachers’ “intellectual formations owed as much to the influence of popular culture, and particularly cinema, as it did to print-based culture” (Masterman, 1998). Thus media teachers in Ontario were also less anxious about the effects of media as their predecessors. The fact that media was considered worthy of study in a high-school setting was proof enough that Ontario was at the forefront of a new conception of education and mass culture, in line with the Birmingham and Toronto schools. That is, they would “no longer discriminate against the media but discriminate within it” (Hanmore, 2005). The Canadian Association for Screen Education was created in 1966, and was responsible for preparing “the groundwork for subsequent developments in media education” (Duncan 1996). Ontario’s first round of media education was influenced by the protectionist idea that “media produced a counterfeit culture” and yet with a familiarity of media, teachers could promote popular culture as “capable of

producing art<sup>3</sup>” (Hanmore, 2005). Media education in Ontario took a brief hiatus in the mid-late seventies as a “back to basics” mandate saw cutbacks on ‘extraneous’ subjects (Hanmore, 2005).

After the dissolution of media studies in Ontario in 1971, the Association for Media Literacy (AML) – spearheaded by Barry Duncan – formed and began grassroots promotion to revive media texts as subjects in education. The Ministry of Education soon took notice of the call for media literacy, and requested the members of AML to “develop a resource book for educators” (Hanmore, 2005). In 1987, the release of *The Media Education Resource Guide* led to reinstating media education, “making Ontario the only educational jurisdiction in North America to have media literacy as a mandatory component of the curriculum” (Duncan, 1996). Ontario is a pioneer in educating on the topic of media. However, multiple technological advances, global events, ideological shifts and educational policies have been implemented since media education’s permanent inclusion. Media studies would soon be partnered with a critical pedagogy.

### **III. And Yet, to Me, What is this Quintessence of Dust?: Visual Culture, Critical Pedagogy and Media Studies**

While countless theoretical moments have influenced the foundation of this project on Media Studies and critical pedagogy, I have predominantly been influenced by the studies of visibility, media studies, and critical theory. Beginning with the visual, I trace how I came to the subject of media education in order to contextualize my own influences and biases.

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<sup>3</sup> Consider also that the Pop art movement had its first North American exhibition in 1962, popular images literally became art commodities. See Hamilton (1956), Rauschenberg (1964), Warhol (1962).

The very first moments of the year 2000 serve as a useful example when considering media culture in the twenty-first century. Global news outlets warned that “computers from PCs to those that run power plants or nuclear defence systems have to be Y2K ready” (CBC, 2000). The “Y2K disaster,” founded by the assumption that computers – controlling domestic or nuclear devices – would crash if they were programmed to turn to the year 1900 instead of 2000, threatened with a range of global repercussions from possible power outages to nuclear holocaust. Visual media were an integral part of Y2K. In addition to constant news coverage, NBC aired a dramatic, made for TV movie, *Y2K* (1999) that visually exploited some worse case scenarios in the vein of apocalyptic action films (Hoffmann, 2000). Even if countries declared that they were indeed “ready,” people’s anxieties led them to accuse weak links. A CBC articles argues that “No one's quite sure how many millennium bugs are lurking in Russia's antiquated computer networks ... Russian bureaucrats either can't or won't tell” (CBC, 2000). Not only does this assertion reveal residual suspicions about Russian/communist politics and practices, it also reveals a paranoid, Hobbesian view of humanity as being based on conflict – in Hobbes’ words, *bellum omnium contra omnes*. While there were no major material repercussions of Y2K, it serves to highlight the uses and centrality of media in the twenty-first century. The tireless media coverage of Y2K transformed fear into an event in and of itself. As technology has progressed, becoming more digital and abstract, media industries have capitalized on a fear of incomprehensibility; a fear of the intricate, unintelligible tools society depends on. The catch was that (it seemed) no one could really know how dire the situation was and fear became the only certain reality. Theorist Jean Baudrillard suggests that in this time of saturated imagery, “reality and fiction are

inextricable” (Baudrillard, 2004, p.228). According to Baudrillard, there has been a collapsing of the symbol and the concrete; a symptom to which there is no cure as the copy replaces (a need for) origins.

With media being used to simulate realities and create fear, Baudrillard suggested that war in the late twentieth century had also become about spectacle. The spectacle of September 11, 2001, promoted by innumerable images, dramatic montages and emotional testimonials, was a magnified version of Y2K. Media replayed phantasmagorical images of terrorism, which eerily resembled fictional Hollywood “Action” films. Baudrillard pointed to the fact that the images of September 11<sup>th</sup> were enhanced by its reality, rather than the violence of the event being fore-grounded and then heightened by the imagery. And through “bogus information, senseless bombardment, emotive and deceitful language,” media are used to evoke familiar spectacles, and create new realities (Baudrillard, 2004, p.229).

Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra is a useful metaphor with which to consider contemporary society. However, it should remain at the level of metaphor. On the topic of reality becoming a spectacle or simulacra, Susan Sontag (2003) suggests that this act

assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world. But it is absurd to identify the world with those zones in the well-off countries where people have the dubious privilege of being spectators, or of declining to be spectators, of other people's pain. (p.118)

These conceptions of simulacra should not be at the cost of forgetting our (corpo)realities. Vivian Sobchack (1991) reminds us that bodies must always exist: She suggests that this kind of theory is “a dangerous mental objectification of lived experience, [instead arguing] that it is imperative that we preserve a subjective kind of bodily sense as we negotiate our technoculture” (qtd. in Donatelli and Winthrop-Young,

1995). It seems it is this sort of fantasizing about the mind's release from the body – and the idea of there *being no Real* – that often leads one to lose touch with bodies and people. With the advent of texts, and especially in visual media texts, Kittler notes that “bodies themselves fell under the regime of the symbolic” and “paper and body, writing and soul fall apart” (Kittler, 1999). That is, while minds were increasingly granted authority and a sort of divinity, bodies were increasingly separated from minds, only to be conceived of in symbolic ways. He argues that “the readability of all history and all discourses turned humans or philosophers into gods. The media revolution of 1880, however, laid the groundwork for theories and practices that no longer mistake information for spirit” (Kittler, 1999). Text allowed man, led triumphantly by philosophers, to become like a God: his ideas could be separate from his mortal body. This idea is no more relevant than in education and intellectual culture.

Media education may complicate this tradition of the mind/body split. Depending on the medium studied, some media require action, interaction and a new level of physicality. Since media such as online videogames include social interaction, users no longer sit quiet and motionless; they chat, insert comments and even pose for pod-cam photos. Furthermore, with the Ontario curriculum's new emphasis on Media Studies paired with media production (See Chapter Two), the English classroom now requires a more hands-on approach. The multi-sensorial, multi-tasking of some media may also lead away from the traditional anti-body conception of intellect. In an interview with Katherine, the educator in my ethnography, she argues that assignments online seemed to better cater to a generation who like to multi-task while working. She explains that,

I'm working while I'm emailing. Or as I'm working I'm chatting. As I'm planning or prepping, I'm responding to emails that have to do with school but

that also have to do with my personal life. I'm living that same kind of blend, that same kind of multitasking idea, so it just makes sense to bring that into the classroom because I think it works for all of us. (interview, Katherine, December 20, 2007)

In this regard, it is possible that youth, insofar as they have grown up with these new media, may be at the forefront of a shift to a more corporeal way of thinking.

Even while youth can affect the meaning of media, media remain an arena in which to reflect and determine the social meaning of youth. Giroux (1997) argues that youth are not granted many opportunities of self-representation in the arenas of mass media or policy making and have come to be demonized. He suggests that this demonization can be seen in popular films which claim to “tackle” the “taboo” subject of teen violence, and teen sexuality. In them, youth are depicted as alienated and confused, either on a rampage or plodding their way lethargically through their adolescence (*Over the Edge* [1979], *Fame* [1980], *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* [1982]). Additionally, there are multiple depictions of youth as pathologically violent, without a sense of morals and with indifference to the future (*River's Edge* [1987], *Boyz N the Hood* [1991], *Natural Born Killers* [1995]) (Giroux, 1997). Giroux connects the demonization of youth through media to the dramatic cuts to public spending, including education, under the 1980s neo-liberal leadership of Ronald Reagan, and echoing Sontag's assertion that even in an image-based simulacra, media has effects on lived realities. He concedes that from this era “youth no longer appear to inspire adults to reaffirm their commitment to a public discourse that envisions a future in which human suffering will diminish while the general welfare of society will increase” (Giroux, 1997). Youth have been more recently been connected to media and violence in contemporary discourse around school

shootings. The gunmen of the Columbine shootings in 1999 were linked to the video game Doom, the gunman at Dawson College in 2006 was linked to “death metal” music, violent films such as *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and the video game *Super Columbine Massacre* (2005) (based on the real-life shootings in Littleton, Colorado), and the orchestrator of the Virginia Tech shootings in 2006 mailed NBC a promotion package between shootings including images which resembled the violent South Korean film *Oldboy* (CBC, 2008).

This depiction of youth echoes the Middletown and Payne Fund studies of the 1930s, and some of the writings on the “generation gap” of the 1960s. That is, it seems that media often reflect or are connected to a negative conception of youth; as lazy, corrupt, villainous and immorally sexual. However, I would complicate Giroux’s reading of youth depictions by contextualizing it in postmodernity. I concur with Giroux that youth can be framed by negative portrayals in the media, and am troubled by the effects of this powerful imagery. I also feel that the multiple meanings and readings symptomatic of postmodernity cannot allow such an absolute analysis.

It is an understatement to say that media images are complicated in the twenty-first century. At the same moment that Baudrillard theorises the simulacra of images, and while they are being used politically, postmodernity creates multiple ways for images to be read. As a cultural theory, it is argued that postmodernism can be linked to the tumultuous moments of the 1960s. The structuralist theory that dominated the 1950s to early 70s – largely influenced by Saussurian linguistics which saw language as a “closed system of elements” – soon required a reconsideration of history, politics and subjectivity. For many, the results of May 1968 in France were disillusioning and led to

the work of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault which offered a politicized deconstruction of signs. While the events of May 1968 were unable to overthrow material relations, this new postmodern theory de-centered meaning in the language, history, and conceptions of the self. It dispelled the idea that people could get beneath the surface of things, and celebrated the destruction of Truth and grand narratives

Through a postmodern reading, media images function in new ways. The postmodern reads images as self-reflexive, revealing the conventions on which they have meaning; they function on a “meta” level. They are fragmented, depthless, political, playful, intertextual, a pastiche. They simultaneously defy and indulge the limits of “popular” and “art.” Susan Sontag (1966) notes that “camp” prevails in postmodernism, and sees the world as if it were in quotes. Fundamentally, there are many meanings and ways to make meaning in postmodernity.

In light of these philosophical shifts, Buckingham acknowledges that media education has had to re-focus. He suggests that most countries with developed practices in media education have largely “moved well beyond protectionism” (Buckingham, 2003). In its stead, students’ experiences and prior knowledge of media have become integral to the program, which “aims to develop student’s *understanding* of, and *participation* in, the media culture that surrounds them” (Buckingham 2003). To foster such a co-operative learning practice, “critical pedagogy” has become an important consideration for media education.

Critical pedagogy is rooted in the work of Antonio Gramsci, who argued that education should not be a practice for upper-class elites who want to better the innately “lacking” subalterns. Rather, he saw education working for change from below,



conceiving schooling as a “transformation of the masses from spontaneous philosophers to philosophically as well as technically educated social actors” (Aronowitz, 2002, p. 115).

From Gramsci’s convictions on education, Paulo Freire (1970) founds the concept of critical pedagogy; a new, radical theory of education. His theory is based on praxis and sets itself the task of “demythologizing” various hegemonic ideologies which are veiled in “common sense” and orchestrate society. By revealing these ideologies, Freire’s critical pedagogy works to unveil reality, cultivating students as active, critical thinkers. Freire’s critical pedagogical model hinges on three important tenants. First, he proposes to dispel the hierarchy of the educator in order to recognize students as active participants in their education. Second, Freire sees critical pedagogy as centered on ‘consciousness raising’ (*conscientização*), arguing that the histories and ideological structures of society must be taken into consideration in order to instill an understanding of power and how it works, by whom, and for whom. By working to uncover hegemonic ideologies, students will earn a clearer understanding of how power works so that they can situate themselves in relation to it. Freire’s final goal is to evoke cultural action, prompting students to engage and struggle with their realities in order to then transform society, opposed to accepting their social circumstances passively. With these three tenants of critical pedagogy, Freire suggests that by making students conscious of the ideological structures behind power, they can more readily challenge dominant culture. He positions education as both a process and practice which has an important role to play in democratic systems.

While Freire’s conception of critical pedagogy is fundamental to my project’s theoretical grounding, it notably lacks a postmodern consideration of the concepts “truth”

and “power”. Henry Giroux (2006), for one, revises critical pedagogy so that it functions more readily amongst postmodern ideals. Giroux combines Freire’s focus on the individual’s critical skills with postmodern considerations of history and content. He stresses the shifting and contradictory nature of historical and contextual limits, using many perspectives highlighting the multiple experiences. Instead of trying to reveal the singular “truth” of texts, as Freire suggests educators should, Giroux’s conception of power is nuanced and fragmented in accordance with the ideals of postmodernity. Giroux conceives of a critical “border pedagogy” which presupposes shifting boundaries (or borders) of power and knowledge, while still, like Freire, maintains that education must be linked to political action. I choose to take up Giroux’s pedagogy because it addresses the multiplicity of power and the fluidity of subject positions – simultaneously constituting multiple identities of empowerment and disempowerment.

I view critical pedagogy as a fair practice. It seeks to treat students with respect, it seeks to create really exciting and challenging dialogues, and it seeks to exercise critical thinking in a way can create active subjectivities. In saying active subjectivities I am not suggesting that current citizens are necessarily *not* active or that people do not think critically now. This fear of passive citizens seems to connect my view to that of Betty Levin. However, to be clear, Levin sees television as a medium which necessarily produces passivity, while I look to education to encourage political and social agency. I am not looking for causes or even proof of passivity; rather my focus is on ensuring that education can succeed in achieving its potential as a public sphere. Critical pedagogy is a method of teaching which discourages complacency which can be unintentionally promoted by the repeat-after-me style of teaching. It makes sense, in a democracy, to use

a pedagogy that encourages active and critically thinking subjects comfortable with socio-political issues.

Furthermore, Giroux promotes a critical pedagogy compatible with the postmodern social climate. By using a pedagogy that reflects the postmodern practice of questioning power, hierarchy, grand narratives, students can be prepared for the world in which they live. In the same way that a postmodern world does not supply simple, absolute narratives, critical pedagogy does not promote a hierarchy of what a correct answer can be. Just as postmodernism de-centers the logic of totalitarian power structures, critical pedagogy promotes students to question power as contextual.

Freire and Giroux's conceptions of critical pedagogy are useful when thinking about media education. In the same way that they hope education can create spaces for considering students' socio-political realities, media texts can overtly introduce contemporary issues for the students to wrestle with. And while I would not suggest that media texts necessarily promote critical thinking, they create a unique opportunity for critical pedagogy. The introduction of visual media texts also troubles the traditional hierarchy of the high school English cannon, by introducing popular culture as classroom texts. Lastly, students can be more confident in reading familiar visual media texts, which further dissolves the structural hierarchy of their learning environment. Thus I took up Freire and Giroux's conception of critical pedagogy, using it to ground my ethnography exploring education through visual media texts.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Words, Words, Words: Discourse Analysis

*It's a skills based curriculum but the critical literacy questions have just been added as of 2007. When we looked at them, when it was released in our department, we were like, great! Excellent! You mean the questions we've been asking are ones that we're now actually supposed to be asking? It felt like everything had finally caught up. There's more acknowledgement of theory, you're seeing that happening in even the standard texts. There's acknowledgement that readings are all constituted by theory, that there's not just 'the text' and then all that weird theory stuff. That all becoming part of the curriculum. (Katherine, interview, December 21, 2007)*

In Chapter One I outline a genealogy of media and media education to begin to understand what motivates Media Studies. The Ontario curriculum and a sample course text are also integral documents to examine, insofar as they circumnavigate the program's limits and intentions, while revealing explicit social values and implicit ideologies. In this chapter, I perform a discourse analysis of *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 11 and 12: English (Revised)* (2007) and *Echoes 12: Fiction, Media and Non-Fiction* (2002) in order to comprehend what is being taught as Media Studies. In reviewing the curriculum documents, I examine what is expected of educators and students and determine how Media Studies are to be scrutinized. I also review the Media Studies content of *Echoes 12*, a provincially approved textbook for university stream students Grade Twelve, used widely by the English faculty at Rosenguild Secondary School<sup>4</sup>, the site of my ethnography. In doing so, I contrast the expectations in the curriculum with those of the course text and then review the values and ideologies in the text itself.

To engage in discourse analysis does not mean to simply review texts for their information. Michel Foucault understands discourse as a marriage between the conventions of language and speech, and social practices and hegemonic ideologies. Thus

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<sup>4</sup> Rosenguild Secondary School is a pseudonym, used to respect confidentiality.

texts are important to analyse as discourses are “an unconscious system of representations by which people live their relationships to the real” (Olssen, 2006, p. 10). Ideology and hegemony work through social communications even, and especially, when power does not appear to be present. Discourse is perceived to *create* rather than necessarily repress or represent realities. Thus ideologies can be evident by examining the specific questions generated by discourses, which are supported and legitimized by the contingent power structures.

While deconstructing texts is an integral practice in any circumstance, texts used as educational tools are particularly pertinent as they explicitly inform and form the social consciousness of children and youth. William Reynold and Julie Webber (2004) write that “all intellectuals, all teachers, all students, and all researchers within any discipline are to some extent incorporated within these systems of control based on a mode of knowledge and truth production that defines much of our social world” (Reynold & Webber, 2004, p. 8). Accordingly, Media literacy is not an isolated form of learning; it does not happen in a vacuum. Rather it should be considered a “social practice, which is situated in various contexts and imbued with power relations, ideologies and social cultural constructs” (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos 2004).

While many theorists have provided ways to understand how cultural ideologies are imbued in educational texts (Bernstein 1971, Giroux 1983, 1997), Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction has provided an important critique (Bourdieu 1982, 1984, 1991; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). According to Bourdieu, schools are but one of the many societal institutions that are guilty of “symbolic violence”, or specific (upper) class values imposed through the subtle exercise of symbolic power in order to “impose a

definition of the social world that is consistent with its interests” (qtd in Giroux, 2006). He describes concept of “cultural capital” as a specific linguistic and cultural capacity normalized by and dependant on the class-located boundaries of a family, and “schools play a particularly important role in legitimizing and reproducing dominant cultural capital” (Giroux, 2006). Thus, by analysing discourse, explicit moments of cultural capital can elucidate biases in curriculum and provide opportunities to address change.

## **I      Ontario Curriculum**

In the Introduction chapter of *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 11 and 12: English (Revised)*, it is suggested that literacy is more than reading and writing, but includes “social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture” (Ontario Curriculum, 2007, p. 3). It also argues that those who are literate take literacy for granted, while the excluded recognize literacy as freedom. As mentioned in Chapter Two, critical pedagogy seeks to contextualize scholarship in social structures and seek to liberate oppressed subject positions. With these statements, the curriculum introduces central concerns to critical pedagogy.

Reminiscent of the shifts seen in the 1960s (See Chapter Two), language development is the focus of the English curriculum, since it “is a fundamental element of identity and culture” (p. 4). The curriculum does not go on to say how culture and identity interact with media, or what kinds of relationships they can have with media. It does however emphasize the importance of addressing and representing multiple identities. It states that in order to create “inclusive programs, students are made aware of the historical cultural and political contexts for both the traditional and non-traditional gender and social roles” (p.33). In using the term “traditional,” the curriculum assumes

the educator has a familiarity of social standards in Canada. In doing so, it also brackets alternative positions as Other. However, it supports a critical relationship between identities and roles. By using literary, informational and media texts, the curriculum states that students are to reflect on themselves, the value of a multicultural society and “recognize that a text conveys one particular perspective among many” (p.4). This statement suggests a postmodern reading of texts, including multiple and contrasting meanings and realities, should be taken into consideration, also accords with critical pedagogy.

The Introduction makes mention of students cultivating critical skills several times, and finally describes how these skills can be formed: “by reading a wide range of materials and being challenged by what they read, students become receptive to new and widely varying ideas and perspectives, and develop their ability to think critically” (p.5). This statement suggests that the *texts* will create critical citizens. And while I argue that contemporary media texts can create possibilities for students to reflect on the socio-political realities, it is problematic to say that simply by encountering texts students will become critical. Further more, what does it mean to be critical?

As part of the Introduction, the curriculum outlines Media Studies. It defines media as “any work, object, or event that communicates meaning to an audience,” which can involve several media “languages” (p.18). This acknowledgement that different media use different languages echoes Debes’ attempt to stake out a “Visual Literacy.” However, it does not go on to say how these languages might differ, or how they should be taught or read in contrast/relation to literature. It notes that critical thinking is of “special significance” when reading media texts, since they are saturate the electronic

information age and have “significant influence on students’ lives” (p.18). It is clear that there is still a suspicion of media texts; the Ontario curriculum seems weary of the saturation of media, without necessarily acknowledging them as ideological. According to the curriculum, literature does not require this special, critical thinking, as it appears that students are not significantly, or dangerously, influenced by print texts. However, media texts are flagged as special and influential during an era that the curriculum deems electronic – the opposite of analogue. By critically thinking about media texts, students can supposedly react to them “intelligently and responsibly” by “differentiating between fact and opinion; evaluat[ing] the credibility of sources ... be[ing] attune to discriminatory portrayals of individuals ... and question[ing] depictions of violence and crime” (p. 18). The curriculum infers that a student who is unintelligent and irresponsible will not be able to distinguish between fact and fiction. This is a problematic assertion, as I wonder how one can truly identify when opinions are at work or that there is something beyond opinion – that representation can be neutral. By requiring that students recognize divisions of fact and fiction, it suggests that these categories can be clear, obvious, and unchanging. Also, I find it interesting that students are required to responsibly and specifically question violence. Once again, youth, media and violence are connected; a trend evident since the early twentieth century and a theme which seems to prevail in the twenty-first century (see Chapter Two). Finally, the Media Studies outline insists that students should have opportunities to create their own media texts. Yet according to the outline, it does not appear that any class time is required to teach students the skills to create media texts. It stresses repeatedly that students are given the *opportunity* to use



these skills. I am curious how much training is offered to teachers in order for them to teach the abundant media that students are expected to use to manipulate.

Grade twelve University Preparation English, known as Eng4U, has its own specifications for Media Studies. There are fourteen specific expectations of media studies under the four headings of “Understanding Media Texts,” “Understanding Media Forms, Conventions and Techniques,” “Creating Media Texts” and “Reflecting on Skills and Strategies.” It appears that the curriculum has considered multiple ways to approach texts, both as content and material form. Students are also required to take an active role, by creating texts and reflecting on their own education.

Success in Understanding Media Texts includes the important category of Critical Literacy. According to this document, Critical Literacy means that students are expected to “identify and analyse the perspectives and/or biases evident in texts ... increasing insight on any questions they may raise about beliefs, values, identity and power” (106). Certainly, this requirement for Media Studies in Ontario accords with a critical pedagogy insofar as they both seek to deconstruct social relations of power. Following this explanation, some prompts are included for the educator as suggestions for putting this critical requirement into practice. These prompts ask students to analyse whether a broadcasted “national political convention reflects the values, beliefs and perspectives of its creators,” how different television channels and newspapers diverge in coverage of an election campaign, and which perspectives are not included in televised debates on social issues (106). It seems that the analysis of politics and power is grounded in very traditional ideas of what “politics” are. Where are the politics of the everyday? Not only do the suggested prompts ignore private spaces as political, but by securing power to

“politics” establish power as static. Thus, while “critical literacy” introduces the idea of critical thought, and opens exciting opportunities for critical exchange, its template for applying such thought in practice remains notably conservative.

Understanding Media Texts does not stop at Critical Literacy. Other notable analyses include Purpose and Audience, and Audience Responses. These two categories prompt exploration into identity and reception, such as how media anticipate and affect certain audiences. This provides a useful exploration into how texts are received in the light of Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding; not only are students asked to examine possible details of the encoding process, but they are also to recognize that decoding is a distinct process of its own and dependent on each receiver. A last notable requirement of Understanding Media Texts is Production Perspectives which is a political economic analysis. It asks students to consider the production, distribution, marketing and regulatory factors that create media texts. One of the prompts invites students to investigate the implications of a soft-drink monopoly in educational institutions, encouraging critique of educational institutions. And while this is a prompt, and not required, it encourages teacher to create discussions around education as an institution and as part of the commercial and political discourses that also shape media texts. In doing so it helps to break down the privileged position of the critic as outside the object of study.

The final three categories of Media Studies enhance the first. Understanding Media Forms asks that students consider how the form and conventions of the medium can influence the content and meaning. This is an important albeit difficult expectation to satisfy. It introduces media as tools, as practices, which can create new readings and

understandings. Yet it is a difficult task since the curriculum requires that multiple media are studied. This seems to require that an educator must be versed in the history, genres and conventions of many media. The expectation Creating Media Texts asks the students to apply their newfound understanding of media texts to making media them. The majority of the prompts include examples of story boards, pamphlets, posters and “multi-media” presentations. These potential student-made texts are notably analogue documents. I wonder if English classrooms are equipped to create media texts like the ones students are asked to read. And are teachers prepared to offer assistance in digital media projects? The final expectation of Media Studies requires students to Reflect on Skills and Strategies gained in the course. This expectation asks students to consider their strengths and weaknesses in reading media, and how their new skills have helped their ability to interpret and create media. This meta moment is interesting, albeit slightly short sighted. It focuses on their practices in the classroom, and misses the opportunity to reflect on their lived experiences and relationship to the media as consumers, citizens, producers. However, it is important to ask students to actively reflect on their literacy processes, and opens door for students to position themselves in social discourse.

Fundamentally, the *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 11 and 12: English (Revised)* makes clear strides to become more contemporary, self-reflexive, postmodern and to create holistic literacy practices. And while it does well to outline – but not restrict – the definition of media, it remains particularly vague and conservative in its discussions of what it means to be “critical” and have “power.” In doing so, it creates several possibilities. In one way, it creates more work for educators, to figure out what critical literacy might mean in relation to media, and in education. Also, it creates the possibility

for teachers to interpret the term as they want to, such as in Katherine's case. Yet it also introduces the possibility that, while it is in the curriculum, educators – with so many guidelines and expectations to complete – may skip over the theme altogether.

It is similarly vague in outlining how students are expected to create media, and to what degree educators are to be involved. I am curious as to how and if teachers are being supplied with the training that the curriculum seems to require; such as a history in various media genres and conventions, a knowledge of how to use multiple media to create texts, an understanding of what “critical literacy” might mean, and how to implement it into an institution which relies on order and compliance.

## **II      Echoes 12**

One of the central Grade Twelve texts used by Rosenguild Secondary is *Echoes 12: Fiction, Media and Non-Fiction* (2002). It is notable to recognize that this text was published in 2002, four years prior to Media Studies becoming one quarter of English, and five years prior to the revised version of the curriculum. Yet, since the classroom in my study used the text, I will analyse it in tandem with the curriculum. The portion of this text book devoted to Media is only approximately thirteen percent of the overall text (seventy three pages are devoted to Media of the five hundred and forty-four), which falls short of the promise that Media Studies would make up one quarter of the English program. And, although “media” are broadly defined by the curriculum, there appears to be a discrepancy in education according to *Echoes 12*. The Media section has five chapters: Marketing and Advertising, Television and Film, Cyberspace, Visual and News Media, and The Medium is the Message, a chapter on McLuhan. This sampling of media is narrower than the curriculum's definition, which also includes songs, video games,

action figures, CD covers, clothing and billboards. By not exploring these media, the text may miss out on reflections which are relevant and significant for students. However, it does include a media theory chapter on McLuhan, which can be applied to a diverse range of media texts.

The Media chapter with the most exercises is devoted to advertising entitled “Advertising and Marketing: It’s not always a product” (Echoes 2002). In it, there are three contemporary advertisements, three “propaganda” posters from the World War II era, a reproduced pamphlet about Internet safety and a “Responding” section which asks students specific questions and ideas to consider about the images and texts provided. The “Responding” section after each exercise is structured thematically. In this section, students are asked questions under the categories “Meaning”, “Form and Style”, “Exploring Context”, and “Creative Extension.” In other words, the media guides asks students to analyse the ideologies within the media text, the structural composition of the text, the social milieu in which the text can be situated and asks the students to exercise their own creative abilities to recreate or further delve into the makings of media. These sets of questions satisfy the four aforementioned expectations of the Media Studies curriculum, and seem to create a holistic study.

However, the questions are notably more simplistic than the curriculum. One exercise explains that “Each of the five [advertisements] focuses on an image of concept as a controlling idea. What is the central idea in each text?” (Echoes 2002). First, the term “controlling idea” recalls a very simplistic way of understanding the media. In the same vein, students are asked to identify the “central idea” in the media texts, as if there is either one reading of the text, or a hierarchy of meaning. This question does not

address the multiplicity of possibilities in a text, as is crucial to a postmodern critical pedagogy.

In another example, one of the media to be read is a pamphlet on “Illegal and Offensive Content on the Internet” which warns of the “dangerous” ideologies available on the web from which “Canadian families want to protect their children” (Echoes, 2002, p.480). First, this phrasing invests in a very specific moral rhetoric. In simply using the term “Canadian families,” it assumes that children are involved. By using children as a reason for social and political alterations and media prohibitions, *Echoes* returns to a familiar moralistic hegemony, seen in the anti-film arguments of the early twentieth century (See Chapter One). Not only is the argument cliché, but the assumed definition of Canadian families is problematic and exclusive. Furthermore, while the pamphlet seeks to address integral concerns about the illegality of child pornography, it also focuses on the idea that the internet is a corrupt (cyber)space.

Finally in order to create their own ads, students are asked to “choose a cause or social goal you feel strongly about, such as promoting recycling, preventing drinking and driving, promoting awareness of the hazards of smoking and drug use, good health, help for homeless people, child labour, etc”(Echoes 2002). This set of suggestions is notable extensive, and rigidly outlines what an appropriate “social goal” might be. Rather than suggesting one possible social cause, the list describes a preferred moral agenda and does not leave much leeway for students who are interested in alternative causes, such as safe sex for teens of all sexual orientations, the legalization of marijuana, or finding a friend a date for prom. Also, while this exercise may try to situate the students in relation to social issues, the idea of promoting a charity cause notably relates to an upper-class audience;

especially the charity of homelessness. This sort of cultural capital assumes the readers themselves are homed; that they would be in a social/financial position to donate with money or leisure time. It also assumes that “homeless” is a stable category whereby people who do not live in or own traditional residences are unhappy, and require help from those who are “fortunate”. Indeed it resembles a capitalist ideology insofar as it assumes that people can only be happy upon consuming “traditional” lodgings and those alternative lifestyles require help to return to conventional living. In this moment, the reader is assumed to be (upper)middle class and homed.

Thus, while the curriculum promotes and leaves room for critical opportunities in reading Media, the text, *Echoes 12*, simplifies the application. While it does technically address the four expectations of the curriculum, it does not recreate critical or political aspirations of its complex counterpart. It assesses texts as having “central” meanings and clumsily assumes readership through extracurricular, “creative” activities. It does not provide a rigorous, complex foundation for students and educators to develop a critical Media Studies program. The course text *Echoes 12* provides a troubling interpretation of the Media Studies component of the Ontario curriculum. In using this text, educators would be led to apply a narrow and outmoded version of media education. Luckily, it is but one of many texts available to educators. As will be explored in the next chapter, Katherine’s class at Rosenguild Secondary only picks and chooses from *Echoes 12* while centrally using a media text during my study. However it would be interesting to review a survey of media education texts (published before and after the 2007 curriculum document) in order to determine how provincially approved texts at large interpret and

apply the curricular document. By provincially approving English text books, Ontario signals to educators how to interpret Media Studies and what it means critique media.



## CHAPTER THREE

### But We Know Not What We May Be: A Critical Ethnography

*Four students separately walked to the garbage, near where I sit, and greeted me warmly. I am surprised to be acknowledged; I easily forget that I'm not invisible, though sometimes I wish I was. I think to myself, "Go on with your daily life! Ignore the man behind the curtain!" (Field Notes, December 3, 2007)*

In previous chapters, I grounded Ontario's media education in a broad socio-political and cultural context (Chapter One) to examine media education motivation, and then analysed contemporary curricular texts in order to gain an understanding of how the marriage of Critical Literacy and Media Studies is prescribed for grade twelve English programs according to provincial standards (Chapter Two). Next, I focus my inquiry at a lived level by exploring a critical ethnography I executed in December of 2007. In doing so, I intended to discover how Media Studies can be taught in practice. The study is not to be viewed as a microcosm of media education in Ontario, since it is just one moment in one classroom, out of a multitude of classrooms, schools and students in the province. Nonetheless, I hope it provides pertinent contemporary examples of some struggles and successes experienced by a classroom as they navigate through media education. In the following chapter, I outline the methodology of my critical ethnography, as well as the ethical and contextual considerations which influenced my results. These factors immeasurably influence how I come to my conclusions about Media Studies.

#### **I. Though This Be Madness, Yet There is Method In't: Methodology**

In addition to discourse analysis, I performed a critical ethnography, which entailed overt, non-interventionalist participant observation and in-depth (individual) interviews, in order to understand *how* media education is being taught in Ontario in

grade twelve. An ethnography can help shed light on the inner workings of a class room, as the researcher “participates in people’s lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions ... collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned” (Hammersley & Atkinson qtd. in Jensen & Jankowski, 1991). Critique of ethnography recognises the danger of “produc[ing] historically and culturally specific knowledges through equally specific discursive encounters between researchers and informants” (Jensen & Jankowski, 1991). Additionally, ethnography must avoid “parochial, romantic and limited vision” narratives that exclude political, cultural and historical framing (Van Maanen, 1988). However, by using careful reflexivity and “specify[ing] who writes, about whom, and from what positions of knowledge and power” ethnography can produce unique insights into the practical application of media curriculum (Jensen & Jankowski, 1991). My ethnography was influenced by critical theory, thus becoming a ‘critical ethnography’. This means that my research in part investigated how the classroom is “mediated by power relations” which are “socially and historically located”, in which “questions of legitimacy, power, values in society, and domination and oppression are foregrounded” (Cohen et al., 2007). The study was infused with an interest in seeing emancipation of the subjects from the (hidden) constraints of power.

The specific logistics of my critical ethnography included my placement in a university stream<sup>5</sup> Grade Twelve English classroom, at Rosenguild Secondary; a public high school in Toronto, Ontario. Rosenguild Secondary School is a pseudonym created to respect the participant’s confidentiality. In order to overcome the Hawthorne effect,

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<sup>5</sup> “[Students] may choose their compulsory [English] courses from three types of courses in Grade 11 and 12: university preparation, college preparation, and workplace preparation” (The Ontario Curriculum, 2007:9).

which qualitative research recognizes as the psychological effect of a study on the participants who come to realize their role as guinea pig (Cohen et al., 2007:156), I remained in the classroom for three weeks. During this period I completed overt, non-interventionist observation insofar as I was seated in plain sight of the students, at a desk in the classroom, and I did not intervene in daily proceedings. To set the tone of my overt observations, I introduced myself to the class before the study began to present an opportunity for questions about the project and my intentions for the research. In doing so, I hoped that my study could also become a learning experience for students about the nature and procedures of Social Science research. The students responded to my introduction with interest and curiosity. I was surprised by this because it was 8:50 a.m. and I was addressing teenagers – an age bracket that is often assumed to be lethargic, self-indulgent or indifferent. Two students immediately put up their hands: one to inquire what would become of my project upon its completion, one wanted my opinion of the universities I had attended (a pressing issue for students potentially on their way to post-secondary schools). This engaged reception, I soon learned, would be typical for the majority of the students, the majority of the time.

During my time in the classroom I used Field Notes to document my observations. In order to remain constant and less conspicuous, I brought the same simple black notebook in which I logged each day of the field experience in pencil (as it was less legible from further away). As my study examines how media education is taught, I utilized ‘thick description’ to record a detailed transcript with the intention of reconstructing conversations, some contextual data including context and timing of events, and descriptions both participant’s and researcher’s “events, behaviours and

activities” (Cohen et al., 2007). I utilized a version of short-hand note-taking in the classroom, which I flushed out into full sentences when transcribing them to the final, digital text. Finally, I examined the Field Notes several times to situate them in themes and analyse. Thus, this research has been constituted *at least* three times by (re)reading and (re)writing: “First it is constructed through the ethnographer’s gaze. Second, it is re-constituted through his or her ability to construct a-text-of-the-field. Third, it is reconstructed and recontextualised through the reader’s work of interpretation and contextualization” (Atkinson qtd. in Pole & Morrison, 2003). According to Socrates’ claims in Plato’s *Republic*, my study would crudely be at the third remove from the essential nature of the Truth.

In addition to the overt, non-interventionalist observation and subsequent Field Notes, I collected data through in-depth interviews: with volunteer student participants and with the educator, Katherine. I hoped to highlight some concerns and issues about the media, provide reflections on the Media Studies program and provide further insights into how the program can be improved. And in doing so, I was able to give voice to the oft unheard students. The interviews took no more than twenty minutes and volunteers remained anonymous by choosing pseudonyms. For the interviewing process, I set out to create an “Interview Guide Approach” whereby only the topics to be discussed were specified in advance, thus allowing the interview to remain relax and conversational. Instead I ended up using “Standardized Open-ended Interviews” (Cohen et al., 2007). This means that I relied upon a pre-determined outline of questions and sequence, and all the participants were asked nearly the same questions in the same order. Largely, this was due to my confidence; as a first time ethnographer, I drafted some questions around the

themes I wanted to examine in case I was nervous, and ended up depending on them throughout each interview. Nonetheless, this method allows for a tidier comparison between the responses on the pertinent issues of this study and reduces some bias of the interviewer by standardizing the questions (Cohen et al., 2007). However, the interview guide was still loose, making room to rearticulate the question to cater it for each respondent, and some questions were skipped or favoured depending on various factors during the interview (time, interest). The questions were designed to be 'open-ended' in that they "supply a frame of reference for the respondent's answers, but put a minimum of restraint on the answers and their expression" (Kerlinger, 1970; Cohen et al., 2007). This type of interview grants flexibility to the interviewer to clear up or extend the questions as the interview proceeds, allows for unanticipated answers, and allows the respondent to express their beliefs more fully (Cohen et al., 2007). The design of the interview flows from general to specific questions; from "the media" writ large, to specific ways that the media education program in Ontario could be altered or improved. However there was a tendency toward more general questions as they "may lead circuitously to the desired information but with less alarm by the respondents" (Tuckerman, 1972; Cohen et al., 2007). I decided to record the interviews with a digital voice recorder in order to capture the responses as completely as possible for transcription, and to avoid interrupting the interview with furious scribing. In order to create an appropriate atmosphere for open, anonymous conversation (see Ethics below), I was able to use two (depending on the schedule of the students and the space) private spaces where the participants could respond freely and a good rapport could be established.

In addition to the observational Field Notes and interview audio transcripts, I also collected cultural artefacts such as the student newspaper, course related hand-outs, tests and extracurricular documents. Though these artefacts do not play a central role in my study, they provided insight into the culture of the classroom.

## **II. There's a Divinity that Shapes Our Ends: Ethics**

With each seemingly small decision in ethnographic research, is a myriad of ethical concerns and considerations. Because this study required human participants – specifically participants under 18 in a public Ontario high school – it had to be approved by two separate Ethics Committees: the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board and the External Research Review Committee for the Toronto District School Board. In order to ensure the safety and anonymity of the participants, multiple considerations affected the procedures and outcome of the study.

First, to insure that the students participants would have the opportunity for fully informed consent, each participant was be supplied with a consent form outlining the procedures, the benefits, rights, risks, and dangers involved as a consequence of their participation in the research project. It was made clear that the students and teacher were volunteers and retained the right to refuse to take part, or to withdraw during the course of the research without prejudice to the participant. Should any student have objected to the study, the observations would have ceased immediately. Luckily, this was not the case. Additionally, a letter was sent to the parents/guardians of the students in order to complete the study in full disclosure. This was also an important step as many of the students were under 18 years of age (though the ethics review committees did not require signatures for the observation portion). During the observation and interviews, none of

the students' names were recorded in order to reserve anonymity, and I have replaced the name of the school, based on the study's ongoing *Hamlet* theme. Rosenguild is a portmanteau that combines the character names Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two friends of Hamlet who observe him in the interest of the King. As I observe a classroom in order to report Media Studies in Ontario, I thought the name was fitting. For the interviews, the volunteer students were asked to create a pseudonym that could not be traced to their actual person (e.g. not a nickname, or variation of their own name). Before any interviews proceeded, a waiver was signed by the student (if 18 years of age) or guardian (if under 18 years) acknowledging the procedures, the benefits, rights, risks, and dangers involved as a consequence of their participation. The interviews were based on volunteer participation, as recommended by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), so as not to discriminate between participants. This recommendation was a concern for me, as I feared that too many interviews would bombard me with hours of transcription and analysis. However, I only obtained five (approximately twenty percent) participants, which was a good sample. Additionally, the TDSB requested that the interviews be conducted outside of class time in order to maintain anonymity of the student from the teacher. While booking a room and conducting the interviews outside of class time was not a problem, signing up participants without Katherine knowing proved to be a challenge. I overcame this obstacle by handing out a small slip of paper to *all* students asking them to check either 'yes, I would like to interview' or 'no, thank you', and a spot for their email addresses for me to contact them should they volunteer. I asked each of the students to hand them back, regardless of the response so that the volunteers could remain unidentifiable. The scheduling of interviews then took place via email, and

outside of classroom space. After transcribing the interviews, all participants were emailed a version and requested to reply with any wishes or considerations.

### **III. The Memory Be Green: Notes from the Field**

Several additional factors should be considered before analysing the issues raised in the ethnography, such as the context of the research. Rosenguild Secondary is a public school situated in a lower socio-economic area and the facility is largely overpopulated; with 1839 students, the cafeteria is only built to hold 728 according to fire code (and all students eat lunch during the same period). A majority of the population are immigrant or first generation South Asian youth. As an example of this, the classroom in which I observed included approximately one self-identified Caucasian student, several East Asian students and the remainder were South Asian. Katherine suggests that this school's culture can provide "non-standard" responses to Western-centric material. She feels that these types of responses must not be identified as "wrong," and tries to acknowledge cultural differences:

because their cultural backgrounds are so varied and so different from the cultural backgrounds... from my cultural background. And they're also different from the cultural background of many of the authors of the text, and many of the intended or expected audiences of the text. And it's not just cultural background, it's also time. Because these kids don't have a lot of knowledge of Western culture there are many cultural references that the producers of the content would assume that they have. (Katherine, interview, December 20, 2007)

An example of one such "non-standard" response, Katherine explained that one course text was heavily laced with youth slang. In the story, the youth protagonists decide to "bomb" – using graffiti – a train, meaning to tag it with designs. One student responded to this slang with disgust ('well, but they're doing such terrible things') thinking that the youth were involved in acts of terrorism. However, Katherine believed that this



misunderstanding provided potential to discuss the space between cultural meanings: “it produced a really interesting discussion about who we are and where we are conditions the way we read. That’s how I like to approach that issue. If it is non-standard, or if it is wrong, what conditions led to that” (Katherine, interview, December 20, 2007). This reaction is in direct relation to the curriculum’s assertion to respect and contrast multiple viewpoints. In this way, Katherine and the curriculum agree to approach and explore cultural differences, rather than ignoring them with silences.

During my observations in the classroom, I also noted several moments of “non-standard” cultural interpretations. In Michael Amereyda’s filmic version of *Hamlet*, Ophelia is depicted as being protected by a controlling father. And although she is clearly on the verge of womanhood, her father, Polonius, ties her shoes for her, threatens her boyfriend Hamlet, and eventually manipulates her to be a pawn for him to take down Hamlet. From my vantage point, Ophelia was the victim of an overbearing patriarch and is often torn between familial obligation and her desire to be with Hamlet. Throughout the student presentations, the dynamic between Ophelia and her father Polonius was often broached, often contrary to my understanding of the text. One student suggested that Polonius “just wants to keep her from danger and exert his power over her ... he controls her in anyway, like a typical father” (Student, Field Notes, December 18, 2007). Echoing this notion, another student added that “Ophelia is a typical girl, [she is] not allowed out after dark” (Student, Field Notes, December 20, 2007). These interpretations of typical familial dynamics articulated for me differing cultural perceptions. In doing so, they punctuate the importance of overtly discussing culture as a factor in shaping the students’ responses, as Katherine practices. However, in noting “different” cultural interpretations,

it is not my intention to suggest any absolute divisions. It is both impossible and undesirable to attempt to delineate to what degree these “non-Western” insights influence the students’ responses. Especially in Toronto (in Ontario, in Canada), which prides itself on cultural diversity, I am not suggesting that these students present a homogeneous “non-Western” cultural response. Nor is it in the scope of this study to analyse exactly which cultural factors are at work (though at the same time I cringe at the idea of considering these “non-standard” responses and respondents as simply part of an “Other” category). Nonetheless, it is important for my study to note that differing cultural references inevitably helped shaped my findings.

Rosenguild Secondary is also notably Math and Science oriented. Katherine mentioned this during my study and in her interview. In her tenure at Rosenguild Secondary, she believes that the students “don’t think of [English] as very important. Because we’re a heavily science oriented school, they tend to see English as the course that brings their marks down” (Katherine, interview, December 20, 2007). In her estimation, Katherine believes this disinterest in the arts is largely cultivated by cultural and familial expectations: “And that has a lot to do with the parental pressure as well ... English is not important” (Katherine, interview, December 20, 2007). She also explained that the students involved in my study showed an uncharacteristic interest in English, which reflected in their high academic performances: “this class has been a little bit of an exception to that, I haven’t felt that in the way that this class has performed” (Katherine, interview, December 20, 2007). My observations accord with Katherine’s assertions. On several occasions, I noted that students were working or discussing math or science related material during the English class. This was most obviously the case when the

supply teacher monitored the class, and students used the time to work on math or science homework. Additionally, my interview participants provided some insight into the significance of English as a subject. Three of the student participants believed English was important to learn language skills, one student felt that she learned analytical tools, and one believed it was a vehicle for creative expression. When asked if they would take an English class in post-secondary studies, four of the five participants made it clear that they were not pursuing art-related programs; two participants would not take another English class, one would take English “only if I had to,” one might take it if it worked with her science program, and one participant did plan to take English courses in the future. Thus, through these observations, it suggests that English is not a particularly central course at Rosenguild Secondary, and this attitude helped shape my study.

Another factor to consider in my research would be time; the duration of the study, the timing of the institution, as well as the time of the study in relation to cultural events. According to Hammersley, “time is a factor in the determination of meanings and perceptions” (Hammersley, 1983). I observed the class for three weeks of a course that spans nearly four months. During my time there, the students were studying their required Shakespeare text; a standard that each grade adheres to with a different text. Prior to my stay, the course materials included, but were not limited to, *In the Skin of a Lion*, by Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje, *A Girl's Story*, in *Echoes 12* by David Arnason, and an online hyper-linking version of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Later, the students would be reading *The Matrix* (1999) and contrasting it with Michael Almereyda's version of *Hamlet* (2000). The assignments during my stay included a class-length presentation by groups of students. For the purpose of the presentation, Katherine

assembled the students into specific groups, and each group would get a different section of the film to analyse and present on. Thus, for my first week and a half in the classroom, the students and Katherine watched and dissected the film together in a dialogue. The remainder of week two was designated as in-class time for the groups to work on a presentation together. Finally in the third week, I watched three presentations while Katherine graded them. Ultimately, these weeks provided a good sample of the different styles of teaching and learning in this classroom.

The English class was the first of the day, beginning at 8:50 a.m., and many students entered the classroom slowly, sleepily, after the bell had rung. The class conversation would inevitably be silenced by the National Anthem and morning announcements which began at around 10:05 a.m. Also, because it was the first class of the day, it was the 'homeroom' which means that school related fundraising and activities also interrupted the learning proceedings. Such interruptions included people asking for recycling bins to empty, phone calls from the office, a holiday food drive orchestrated by students, the hand-out and completion in class of "IFlurtz." The schedule of Rosenguild Secondary was altered two days while I was there; one morning was a "late start" day, where classes started at 10 a.m. and lasted only one hour, and the final day was the holiday assembly in which all classes were a half hour, followed by the assembly and early dismissal. Because this study spanned December – typically a cold, snowy month for Torontonians – weather was also a factor that inevitably affected the study. There was at least one day with inclement weather, which was not officially a "snow day," but the students, Katherine and I were all late to class. December is also culturally associated with celebration. December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007, was Eid al-Adha, or the Second Eid, a holiday

celebrated by Muslim students, and most students did not go to school. With the approval of some student presenters, the classroom activities did continue in the English class. Additionally, this study was scheduled immediately prior to the winter holidays, or Christmas holidays. These celebrations, and the excitement for the time off, inevitably also affected the participants', educator's and researcher's moods.

In relation to timing, the day that I scheduled to hand out my Interview Sign-up sheets was another moment which influenced the outcome of my in-depth interviews; it turned out to be an exceptional day. Katherine warned me in advance that a supply teacher would be monitoring the class on the sign-up day. We both agreed that this would be fine for my study, and even limit the possibility of Katherine learning the identity of some student volunteers. However, the tone and activities of the day were distinctly different than a typical day, with the students reflecting a socially-focused anti-authority sentiment and largely not engaging in scholastic endeavours. I believe that the anti-authority reaction of the students stemmed from the actions of the pedagogue. Before the students were given a chance to prove otherwise, they were reprimanded for not focusing on English homework, though simultaneously were given non-class related material to work on (they were given IFlurtz). Some of the students responded combatively; a female student and the teacher equally participated in a sarcastic, passive aggressive disagreement, loud enough for many to hear. Many of the students utilized the time socially and focused their energy on analyzing their "IFlurtz." For example, one particularly social student spent time entertaining at four different table clusters. I handed out the sign-up sheets for the interviews during the last ten minutes of class time. Even though I emphasized that this exercise was designed for maximum confidentiality, the

students extended their uncharacteristic, mass socializing to this time. It seemed that the students were either discussing participation in the interviews, or ignoring the request altogether while socializing. At the bell, many of the students left their answer slips on the table, open to viewing, while other students handed them to me at the door, as I requested. At least one table handed me their slips in a clump of “no” responses, and a student from that table let me know that she might change her mind to participate. This exchange confirmed for me that some of the students had answered en masse, rather than according to their own – possibly alternative – interests. I ultimately secured five interviews, which was a good survey (twenty percent) of the class. However, I must recognize that the day that I decided to hand out the sign-up sheet may have contributed to the number and persons who participated.

Due to the ethical requirements, the ability to contact interview participants was distinctly strained. In order to retain confidentiality from Katherine and other students, I did not approach interview participants in the class space at any time, for any reason. I intended to use emails to schedule interviews and interact with potential respondents. I quickly learned, however, that the interview participants were not as receptive to email as I thought. I was particularly surprised since youth are often heralded as digital-centric, and four fifths of my student interview participants later identified that they most frequently use internet compared to other media. Nonetheless, several respondents did not respond to my emails, and I ended up contacting them outside of class time with help of Rosenguild Secondary’s secretaries. If they did respond to my emails, some students forgot interview times and I was stood up on a few occasions. Some reasons for missing interviews included the erratic scheduling of graduate photographs, and being involved

with holiday assembly and other after-school committees. In preparing for the study, I forgot to consider how busy many of these high school students' days are. Many spares or lunches are tied up in extra-curricular activities. These conditions created a notably stressful timeframe to fit all of the interviews in, and, knowing this, I would have started this process much earlier than the second week of a three week study.

The five volunteer interview participants were all female. This dynamic is also a unique factor in determining the outcome of my study. Hammersley writes that "women who are studying women ... [share] the experiences of domination and subordination that are a fundamental condition of the social lives of women everywhere" (Hammersley, 1983; McRobbie & Hobson, 1979). Importantly, Hammersley also notes that a universal view of 'shared femininity' must also be avoided, as there are multiple subject identities that necessarily affect the views of every participant (including race, class, sexual orientation, ability, etc.). I did however feel a connection with each of the interview participants, and look back fondly on each interview experience.

Another consideration is the context of the teacher participant. Katherine identifies herself as Caucasian, and originating in a middle-class socio-economic status. While she has entertained the idea of pursuing graduate schooling, she explained in our first meeting that she believes teaching in a public system can provide a venue to apply academic theory (critical pedagogy, cultural theory) to effect lived realities. Katherine remains active in academic and creative circles, writing, publishing, and attending conferences. This is largely why I did not change her name for the purpose of this study; as she has established herself and her activities in a public forum, though I still do not use her last name in favour of some confidentiality. I do not call her by her last name in this

study because, as I see it, such a formality would not reflect our working relationship. In the interest of full disclosure, I provided her with a detailed proposal of my project prior to her participation agreement which included a detailed theorization of critical pedagogy and media theory (in the vein of Chapter Two). Although knowing the motivations for my research might have altered Katherine's treatment of me, and her actions, I believe that even my presence in the classroom would have altered these relations. She responded favourably to my proposal and theorization, explaining that she had considered critical pedagogy in schooling for years in a personal blog, and that reading it was in a way like "coming home."

Finally, I must acknowledge my own multiple identities as female, Caucasian, researcher, Master's student, Teaching Assistant and from a working-class, rural family. As all research is situated in relations of power, I must acknowledge that I attempt to be respectful when discussing the research involving Katherine. I am indebted to her granting me access to her classroom and insights, and respect her rigorously theorized pedagogical practices. Of course it must also be acknowledged that this report is in part for the completion of a Master's degree, thus will cater to the conventions and requirements of such an academic task and audience. Finally, as a Master's student at the wake of an academic career, I hope this to be a pilot project for future related, though expanded, projects of kind.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### A Little Month: An Analysis of Moments

*I returned with K to the English office and once again discussed the class' responses and analyses of the film. They weren't caught up with plot ideas, and went directly to abstract concepts and interpretations. I explain that there are times when I'd like to go shake the students, asking "Do you know how special this is?" That I can recall I didn't grapple with some of these themes until university. A driving reason for me to say this to the students is that Katherine has explained that most (all?) of the students see this as their last English course, since they hope to become doctors. (Field Notes, December 10, 2007)*

Having already examined the expectations of media education in a genealogy, and a curricular and course text, I illuminate what Ontario's English program intends to teach about media. However, each educator, student body and classroom context will influence a unique application of media education. In the following chapter, I analyse the data from my critical ethnography at Rosenguild Secondary in order to understand how Katherine's class at Rosenguild Secondary apply Media Studies. Do students discuss media in a critical, political and engaged way? What sorts of issues are explored in an Ontario classroom and how do media play a role? How does the educator entertain a critical pedagogy?

I have organized the data under three perspectives. In the first, I explore whether and how media can be used in the classroom as a catalyst for politicized discussions of contemporary social realities. In the second part, examine more general moments of political and critical conversations, and the sorts of possibilities in an Ontario English classroom. Finally, I reflect Katherine's strategies to implement a critical pedagogy, and the reactions from the students. While the data will necessarily overlap, it is my hope that this sequence of themes can create a 'causal network' "which pull together independent and dependent variables into a coherent pattern" (Pole & Morrison, 2003, pp. 95-96). All

the while, I will aim to remain reflexive, attune to negative examples, seek alternative explanations, attempt to represent the range of voices in the field, and will not iron out the “messiness of ethnographic research” (Pole & Morrison, 2003).

## **I. To Hold, as It Were, the Mirror Up to Nature: Using Visual Media and Critical Pedagogy**

Media Studies provide for Ontario a unique opportunity to cultivate critical literacy. While critical literacy can certainly be fostered without utilizing the media, contemporary visual media provided for the class of Rosenguild Secondary opportunities to apply a critical, political perspective to contemporary social issues.

At the time of my study, the class was studying Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. When Katherine announced that the students would focus on cinematic adaptations as their core texts, instead of the print medium the students responded with surprise and excitement. In response, Katherine explained that “the reason we’re not predominantly reading is because Shakespeare was meant to be performed, and film is the new (modern) medium for performance” (Katherine, Field Notes, December 3, 2007). Certainly, film’s ability to reach a mass audience certainly suggests that it is the logical contemporary medium for the students to view the Shakespeare adaptations. The classroom at Rosenguild Secondary was equipped for viewing films, whereas coordinating a trip to the theatre is notably more complicated. In her interview, Katherine suggests that students “are definitely more receptive to [visual] media” as they “see books as alien to their world” (Katherine, interview, December 20, 2007). She also notes that this sentiment is actually articulated in Michael Almereyda’s filmic rendition of *Hamlet* (2000), which is the central text the class used. She notes of the mise-en-scene that, “Although Hamlet does

have some books, [Polonius, Ophelia's father's] house is full of books and if there is was ever a generation gap, the dad is the one with the books and the rest of the kids they have the camera and film and the computers" (Katherine, interview, December 20, 2007). The success of Katherine's choice to use a contemporary visual film reaffirms my conviction of using visual media texts.

Katherine then illustrated the ways that power has shifted in contemporary society by drawing an example from Almereyda's film adaptation of *Hamlet* (2000). She notes that "the opening scene clearly sets the film in New York, and the way that Almereyda adapted the text [makes] Denmark the company" (Katherine, Field Notes, December 7, 2007). With this statement, some students excitedly make the connection that the role of the king is now replaced by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Katherine agreed and suggested that for Almereyda to translate power in the present" means a shift of power; "it's not the president, it's the corporation. This is what Almereyda thinks of the world" (Katherine, Field Notes, December 7, 2007). By identifying Almereyda's "Denmark" as no longer a Nation state but a corporation, the students come to recognize that the power position of the sovereign has a contemporary counterpart in the CEO. Later during a presentation, a student contrasted Kenneth Branagh's more traditional filmic interpretation of *Hamlet* (1996) with Almereyda's and argued that "in Branagh's, the king is like the messenger of God and he controls. In Almereyda's, CEOs are kings and control" (Student, Field Notes, December 20, 2007). The inclusion of this contemporary, visual text in the class at Rosenguild Secondary provided a forum to consider how power functions in contemporary society. This is an important consideration, according to

critical pedagogy, as it encourages students to identify contemporary power structures in the hopes that they can then engage with power as active citizens.

Another example of an important politicized issue by a contemporary text is the discussion on teen suicide. After another presentation, Katherine encouraged students to critically view Hamlet's suicidal contemplation with sympathy, rather than dismissing his thoughts as mental instability. She said, "I don't think it's crazy to want to commit suicide, to buckle under pressure; what does it mean to be a human? Becoming an adult is so much pressure; who wouldn't just want to sleep?" (Katherine, Field Notes, December 19, 2007). Later during an interview I held, a student recalled that particular conversation as being invaluable. She explained that discussing teen suicide in the classroom provides "some place to get rid of our tensions" and added that "yeah, I feel that way too ... but all you have to do is head on, you'll get through it" (Aliyah, interview, December 19, 2007). Almereyda's contemporary visual text that contained characters with which the students could identify, allowed Katherine to approach an important issue, which she may not have been able to access otherwise, and which was evidently quite important for many of these teenage students.

The students were able to apply new socio-political meanings to a text based in New York City and released before September 11, 2001. As the class silently viewed the introduction of Almereyda's *Hamlet*, which uses images of fighter jets and crosshairs, a student near to me leaned over to a friend's desk and noted, "keep in mind, this is before 9/11" (Student, Field Notes, December 3, 2007). The next day, Katherine links the setting of the film as being prior to September 11, explaining that time and place effect how meanings can be made. By provoking the students to consider changes in the physical

and political landscape of New York, the film provided an important consideration of contemporary socio-political events for the class. Although the class did not make the connection of shifting race relations to September 11, later in interviews one student noted the altered social climate for Muslim North Americans. When asked if she felt that mass media brought communities together or pulled people apart, she explained that, as a Muslim, she saw the media being used negatively. She suggested that the media fuelled a “hate” of Muslim people, and cited the wide reports of Aqsa Parvez, a Toronto Muslim teen, who was reportedly killed by her father for not wearing a traditional hijab (Reuters, 2007). This story was reported days before the interview, and the student suggested that it was just another example of Muslims being publicly cast as “monsters”: “I’m pretty sure there’s more to the story but the news is just using that to make Muslims look bad” (Aliyah, interviews, December 19, 2007). It is important to recall that, as Susan Sontag suggests, media have material effects. And it is precisely because of these effects that contemporary and popular media should be read in the classroom. In publicly grappling with social and political repercussions of media, students are able to identify with, share and acknowledge their lived experiences.

Almereyda’s version of *Hamlet* provides multiple depictions of contemporary citizens’ relationships with technologies. During one presentation, a student noted that the film often frames scenes as if the characters are being watched through a surveillance camera, and suggested that “surveillance connects us” – the diegetic world and the world of the audience (Student, Field Notes, December 18, 2007). Again, through Almereyda’s cinematic choices, a student is able to make a connection to a current socio-political issue. Later, another student’s presentation complicates this relationship to technology,

suggesting that while technology is a means to control us (through things like surveillance), it also allows people to “inter-be”, which is a term used in the film denoting an intimate connection between people. He suggested that “Inter-being happened through [the use of] technology” in the film, which grants people new and different spiritual connections with one another (Student, Field Notes, December 20, 2007). The combination of these ideas on technology suggests that the class was able to critically consider multiple perspectives. They noted our reliance on technology in that we are able to forge connections through technologies, and yet we can be limited by technologies which are used to survey us. By making these connections, the students were able to use the film to contemplate our contemporary moment, and express their feeling about contemporary life in a public forum: the class. These opportunities would not have been raised by the original text version of *Hamlet*, which is contextually distanced from contemporary society. This approach allows students engage with their contemporary realities, while simultaneously learning a canonical text.

It is my contention that media studies not only fosters critical literacy through its content, but supports a critical pedagogy through its use of popular visual texts, which are both targeted at a mass audience and easily approached by audiences in all social situations. Although the students at Rosenguild Secondary were not originally familiar with Michael Almereyda’s version of *Hamlet*, they were more likely to have the cultural capital necessary to understand such a text as well as the political and social connotations of its casting, setting, and mise-en-scene. That is, by using a text that the students feel more familiar with, Katherine is able to more readily appeal to the goals of critical pedagogy. From my point-of-view as observer, the students offered more of their own

interpretations of the visual text than they would have had they studied a written text, and they dominated more of the class time than their teacher.

## **II. Gave Us Not That Capability and Godlike Reason to Fust in Us Unused: A Political Critique in the Class**

First and foremost, critical literacy is based on a vast history of cultural and critical theory (see Chapter Two). One of the central tenants of critical theory is to examine issues politically, critically, and in relation to social structures and power. As such I will (re)examine my fieldwork to analyse exchanges where the class engages with contemporary social issues according to such a notion. In doing so, critical pedagogues (Freire [1970], Giroux [2006]) attest that students will be encouraged to mature their critical engagement as politically active citizens.

On several occasions, the class was asked to consider relations of power, specifically who has it, who does not, how it shifts, and why it shifts. One discussion of power was based on a previous lesson on the “Great Chain of Being”. The Great Chain of Being refers to a system of hierarchy that dates back to the medieval period: it covers everything on earth from God to minerals, making sense of the organization of humans in-between. After reviewing this concept, Katherine described the shift from this medieval ideology to new ideas about humanity in the Renaissance. First, Katherine notes that the Great Chain of Being is but one example of one of the ways that society orders itself. She highlights the reality that the organization of society is shifting, and that there have been and are many ways in which any given society can be structured. Next Katherine asks the students to question who controls power and power structures, and describes the medieval conviction that God orders power, as compared to the

Renaissance ideal that rational man is the designer of his own destiny. Again, this assertion allows students to situate the abstract concept of “power” in very material terms. While Katherine locates these ideologies in the past, in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, she notes that these ideas nonetheless remain integral strands in contemporary society.

One application of the exploration of power brought up by *Hamlet* is the exploration of mental illness and society. Katherine suggests that Hamlet is a “good Humanist” and feigns madness in order to gain power over his tumultuous circumstance. This promotes a subsequent discussion on the conventions and perimeters constructed around mental illness:

S: can we talk about mental illness – like, can you distinguish if they’re aware that they’re crazy or not? If it is personality or performance? Is it their true character or a sickness?

S: there are people who are brilliant when they’re off their pills – like in *Beautiful Mind* – and schizophrenia is their true character

K: this reminds me of a poet, Gwendolyn McEwen. Her mom was mentally ill and she always worried about herself – she didn’t want to become sane if that meant losing her poetic gift. There has been a long connection between art and insanity, a dangerous myth. However, it is the nature of art to approach things with an alternative mind. Now, drugs and mental illness: that’s a postmodern theme...

S: when is somebody responsible for their actions? (Field Notes, December 19, 2007)

The class entertains difficult but important questions around mental illness. Is mental illness simply one’s “personality”, or does the person simulate a performance of what it *means* to be mentally ill? What are the limits between being oneself and being sick?

Katherine adds that mental illness might even be desirable, when linked with artistic ability – the opposite of the scientific, the Rational. By questioning the social limitations of what constitutes mental disability, the class simultaneously skirts the issue of what is



“normal”. Importantly, they also broach the idea of the constructs of “normal” and “ill” as shifting through time;

S: In the old days, people were considered to be insane when they had good ideas  
S: Hamlet says to his friends that Denmark is a prison – he couldn’t prove himself, but he’s got a point  
K: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report that Hamlet is acting crazy, but Hamlet says whatever the mind perceives of your world, that is your world ... that is a direct link to the Matrix ... we dismiss what we don’t understand. (Field Notes, December 19, 2007)

The class’ arguments suggest that “good” ideas and conceptions of the world are relative to time, and to the perceiver. Not only does this conversation allow students to consider shifting relations of power in determining “normal” and “ill”, it provides them a social, public venue in which to critically consider this important issue (like the issues of suicide). Thus, according to critical literacy, this conversation illustrates that political issues can be explored in relation to power and social structures in class space.

Another issue in critical theory has been the analysis and theorizing of identity. Interestingly, identity was not necessarily one of the central themes brought up by the study of *Hamlet*. Yet on several occasions, students interjected critical analyses of political social identity issues. One such comment touches on identity as an abstract, constructed subject. In discussing mirrors as a symbol in Branagh’s *Hamlet* (1996), and the use of self-filming in Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000), a student suggests it reveals that “we’re all aware of ourselves playing parts” (Student, Field Notes, December 18, 2007). This is a sophisticated reflection on identity as complex and multiple; as awareness of a self, yet inevitably being many selves.

On other occasions, the students have made casual statements about social identity constructs. During the first scene in Branagh’s *Hamlet* (1996), an eerie tone is set

with a Black male guard guarding the entrance to a castle. Later, responding to what they saw, a student suggested that “there was a Black guard – they always get killed first” (Student, Field Notes, December 4, 2007). This student was responding to the filmic convention of Black characters being dispensable, and being the first to be killed off, should a death in the film need to arise. Of course, this directly relates to the social positioning of Black, and other people of colour, and their “symbolic worth” in society as viewed through media. And without any prompts, this student picked up on the convention immediately. Similarly, during a presentation another student analyses the social status of women through the scene of Ophelia jumping into a pool in Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000). Regarding Ophelia’s watery end, the student suggests that the “image of women underwater” reveals an experience of “powerlessness” (Student, Field Notes, December 18, 2007). The student then pauses on a still of Ophelia standing over a pool, in which there are distinct cross-shaped patterns on the liner; “in the pool, she stands above crosses. This reflects Christianity and the role of the martyr – the innocent sacrificed” (Student, Field Notes, December 18, 2007). Not only does the student touch on a popular symbol of women, water and powerlessness, but also notes the role of women as martyrs in and as persecuted by Christianity. I recognize that the student may not necessarily have prior knowledge to the use or frequency of these symbols and conventions. Furthermore, it is also possible that this student is attempting to link Ophelia with Christ as martyr, rather than woman as martyr. However, they have nonetheless outlined an important relationship between women and (lack of) power. Although identity was not a primary critique done in the class, these students presented sophisticated analyses of social identity and power.

Critical theory often produces the critique of one's very own confines of power. For the English class in Rosenguild Secondary, this means recognizing the school as an institution of power which sets limitations on its occupants. In an early discussion on *meaning*, Katherine asks the students to consider how meaning is made in the context of school;

K: how is meaning made in a class forum?

S: we analysed every word vs. read for pleasure

S: posting on the class blog/talking about the story helped make meaning

S: groups help/shift meaning making

S: posts forced new (ways of reading), we all read differently and shared. (Field Notes, December 4, 2007)

The act of drawing attention to *schools as an institution* is a moment of critical literacy, insofar as it prompts students to consider the institution as a distinct place with unique parameters. One student identified the school as a place of rigorous study, rather than of pleasure. Yet most of the students suggested that school could foster a sense of communal intellectual sharing, specifically with the use of digital spaces (blogs). Thus, this mention of the school as a particular place where meaning is made allows the students to consider its perceived limits and possibilities. However, at the same time that Katherine demonstrates her steadfast commitment to critical literacy, in a self-reflexive moment she also suggests that on this (my first) day in the classroom, she might not have mentioned the school in the discussion of meaning-making. It is necessary to recognize that Katherine did know my intentions prior to the fieldwork (exploring critical pedagogy in the classroom) and my presence would ultimately affect the outcome. Yet, it is also clear that there is no way that my presence could affect her pedagogy so absolutely so that she suddenly practiced critical literacy each lesson. This is clear in the abundance of examples from which I am drawing.

In another example of critically considering school as an institution of power,

Katherine reminds students of the physical constrictions and conventions of “study”:

[In Humanism] Passion was found in the body; in the Great Chain of Being, animals were seen as bodily, while angels had no body. Humans were somewhere in the middle. Recall, for those of you in or have taken philosophy, the mind/body split. It’s still with us. For example in classrooms, when you’re learning, your body is kept still, you don’t move – this is part of the mind/body split legacy. (Field Notes, December 4, 2007)

“The Great Chain of Being”, a concept that the students learned the previous year, locates passion, death, and animalism in the body, while godliness is abstract; it’s in the mind.

Katherine recalls this historic mind and body split, and, by linking it with the practices of the classroom; she dissolves the illusion of “common sense” or “tradition”. That is, she situates the practices of power (of the classroom) in historically contingent beliefs. This critique of power, again, allows the students to consider the school *as* an institution, *as* a socially constructed space, rather than an inevitable set of rules.

In her interview, Katherine makes it clear that she struggles with the idea of “critical literacy” in school, insofar as fostering critical thought in an environment which requires obedience seems to be a contradiction in terms;

... because [critical literacy] questions really are about power and control and you’re asking them in an environment designed to control and exert an authoritarian form of power – so what ends up happening, if you’re really doing your job with these questions, is that the students start to look at school and realize that school is very much that controlled environment and that environment that is controlled through technology. I would just have to say one thing after today’s presentation to invite the students to ‘look at where you are, and how free are you’. To what degree is your situation in school different from Hamlet’s? Listen to what they were saying. It’s not going to be a far leap. (Katherine, Interview, December 20, 2007)

At the same time she is fostering a critical acknowledgement of school as an institution of power, she recognizes the tension between critical literacy and an establishment – one

that she is a part of – which thrives on rules and control. Nonetheless, it is clear that Katherine adamantly creates a space to foster critique, including the critique of the institution that grants her power.

#### **IV. Rough-hew Them How We Will: Teaching Critically**

While it is important for the critical pedagogue to create a space for and foster critical thinking and debate, critical pedagogy is also a practice by the educator with distinct features. That is, it is not enough to engage critical literacy; the pedagogue should also strive to maintain complementary practices (see Chapter Two).

A fundamental practice of the critical pedagogue is to dispel the hierarchy of the classroom. One way that Katherine exercised this practice was by creating critical *discussions* rather than instructional lectures. The latter practice takes the view that students are empty vessels in which to store “important” select information, thus making the teacher the bearer of “correct” knowledge. In order to foster the *activity* of critical thinking, the pedagogue should open the classroom to interpretation. Largely, from my vantage point as observer, it seemed that students were as likely to interject interpretations as Katherine. This is reflected throughout my field notes. And on several occasions, Katherine literally encouraged students to share their ideas, instead of worrying about being “wrong”. After watching *Hamlet* (2000) the first time, a boy tried to articulate his ideas and stumbled. Encouragingly, Katherine exclaimed “it’s okay! There are no wrong answers” (Katherine, Field Notes, December 4, 2007). Later, Katherine sits with a group of students who are struggling in the course. I overheard her passionately discuss the versions of *Hamlet* explaining “get away from worries about right and wrong interpretations. All interpretations are different, interesting. Think about

why you like one version more than another?” (Katherine, Field Notes, December 12, 2007). In overt comments such as these, it is clear that Katherine is attempting to foster a space where students are encouraged to actively think, actively share.

I asked the interview participants how they perceived the classroom structure. Of the five interviews, four of the students believed class time was conversational, oriented toward opinions and impressions. Two of the participants suggested that while class was conversationally based, Katherine would sometimes clarify student’s responses as “there are some right and wrong answers, like concepts that have already been established” (Hilary, interview, date). There are also mixed reactions to the idea of an open forum classroom. While most interviewees responded positively to the idea of a conversational class, one respondent suggested that it “sucks for people that don’t really talk. I’m one of them. I don’t like talking” (Aliyah, interview, December 19, 2007). However, the respondent also acknowledges that the blog allowed her to participate, and that, while she doesn’t like talking, a conversational environment was “easier”: “Instead of thinking ‘Oh, am I going to be wrong’ you can just say anything” (Aliyah, interview, December 19, 2007). Finally, one respondent believes that the course was oriented like a lecture. She explains that Katherine “knows a lot about computers and most of the time she teaches on the computer”, and that “most of the time when she’s giving lectures I think she’s mostly the one talking” (Anna, interview, December 19, 2007). I will note that this respondent had a particular disdain for the use of blogs, computers, and internet as a necessary part of the classroom and I wonder if her opinion was coloured by this disinterest. However, that is not to say that her experience is any less valid than mine or that of any other

respondents. This is an important contradiction because a classroom can be different depending on the vantage point.

When interviewing Katherine, I asked her how right and wrong answers function in class discussion. She identified that “wrong” answers could also be seen in the classroom as “non standard interpretations”, insofar as the varied cultural influences in the class may lead to interpretations not supported by the text, and outside of Western conventions (See related discussion in Chapter Three). However, even in these moments of mistaken interpretation, she provokes discussion *about* the misunderstanding; “it produced a really interesting discussion about how who we are and where we are conditions the way we read ... If it is non-standard, or if it’s wrong, what conditions led to that” (Katherine, interview, December 20, 2007). I think it is important to note the tension between creating an open forum for discussion and not penalizing wrong answers. Of course, it is just as harmful to fall into idealist relativism, or even philosophical nihilism. Thus it is a constant negotiation to create a non-hierarchal, inclusive space, while at the same time maintaining the connection to previously understood concepts and negotiating the parameters of what is acceptable.

Another method of shaking the standard classroom hierarchy is for the pedagogue to practice self-critique. That is, by revealing one’s mistakes and authorship, the instructor can both encourage self-critique in the students and help minimize their distinct power position. One example of Katherine’s self-depreciation arises as she discusses growing up: “independence is exciting, but also sucks [*laugh*]. It’s hard to make decisions on your own and not be told what to do” (Katherine, Field Notes, December 4, 2007). With this utterance, I noted that her tone and jovial delivery reveal a genuine

honesty. I find, throughout my observation, that there are several points when she laughs at herself. Not only is this entertaining for the listener, but it represents an on-going self-critique. Another instance of Katherine's critique of her own power as instructor is in the practice of labelling her hand-outs. Although she admits that she had recently stopped practicing, she put her name on hand-outs to "impress a sense of authorship, as hand-outs are political tools, which often go un-authored implying objectivity, omniscience, truth, fact..." (Katherine, Field Notes, December 5, 2007). This exercise ultimately dispels the idea that teachers' printed words are Truth and necessarily accurate. Rather, by putting one's name on each hand-out, the pedagogue identifies that the printed word is contingent on each author.

Another hierarchy that Katherine also dispels is the establishment of "valid" course texts. In addition to the focus on *Hamlet* as a film, versus the printed play, (which is satisfying the media studies portion of the curriculum) she encouraged the students to utilize *SparkNotes*: a popular online study guide in the vein of *Cliffs Notes*. In brainstorming sources of supplementary information, Katherine suggests *SparkNote* summaries;

K: why don't you look at Sparknote summaries of *Hamlet*?

Ss: Sparknotes?! It's unethical...

K: why not! I use them because I know I haven't seen it all, but I must acknowledge where I get these ideas from. Besides, there are no Sparknotes for Almereyda's film, so there are no risks there. What does Almereyda include or drop from the original text? We will need to know the conventional interpretations for this. (Field Notes, December 7, 2007)

Students have been trained to perceive that "real" education does not come from study guides. More so, it is clear that they have been told that using a source such as *SparkNotes* is "unethical", according to conventional English studies. However, rather



than condemn these sources as “cheating” or giving students “answers”, as if there were one set of answers and *SparkNotes* somehow could too easily reveal them, Katherine proposes the use of study guides as an enhancement. Especially because they are studying and completing assignments on the cinematic versions, she believes that study guides are not a threat. Later, a student would find a paper by an undergraduate student on Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000). However, like the *SparkNotes*, Katherine encouraged the students to use the material but to always cite their sources. Katherine dismisses the conventional hierarchy of what is “appropriate” reading material or sources for an English course. In doing so, she once again recognizes that knowledge is a collaborative process; for the classroom, and in society.

One last issue of critical pedagogy is to empower the students so that they can mature into critical, active citizens (See Chapter Two). Of course, in the act of promoting critical discussions, open all students’ opinions and interpretations, Katherine fosters a sense of empowerment for the students, as seen in the previous discussion. However, she also extends this practice to empowering the students who are struggling with English as a subject. In a discussion after class, Katherine explains that she applies a calculated risk in grouping all of the students together who have weaker marks. In doing so, she hopes that she can prevent the students from quietly riding the coattails of the stronger students in a group, and hopes that the students take charge of their education. In the past, she notes that some students have taken the lead and developed valuable leadership skills in the absence of other academic leaders. However, she also recognizes the risk that the students could nonetheless flounder. Katherine is also hyperconscious that there is a certain amount of satisfaction in not allowing these students to get by on other student’s

work, though the *reason* for her practice is the hope that these students can become empowered and take control of their own work. This method is risky; it does create the potential for students to socially recognize the group as a less successful group, thereby alienating the members. However, the potential for students to rise up and seize the opportunity to be responsible for their work opens the possibility for empowerment. Regarding the class that I observed, it is hard to say how Katherine's practice succeeded. From my observations, students were often absent from the table, though near to the presentation they did seem to have obvious moments of collaboration. The presentation itself was brief – fifteen minutes of a possible sixty – as there seemed to be a misunderstanding that the presentation was on that day; only three of the four presented. They seemed to have some good insights – especially the third presenter – but with the speed and apparent nerves, it was difficult to really grasp what their points were. Again though, it is difficult for me to say how this particular group fared, I only observed them for three weeks of a full semester.

Despite the varied respondent opinions and unclear results of a strategic practice, it is clear that Katherine is an active practitioner of critical literacy and critical pedagogy. The classroom was brimming with critical ideas, conversations, abstract interpretations, and political issues. As an advocate of critical pedagogy, it was an exciting surprise to experience the potentials of the practice; that is, I was unsure of what kinds of conversations could be enacted in a high school space. And though I tried to enter the space without too many preconceptions, I was truly taken aback by the engagement and level of conversation the class entertained.

## CONCLUSION

### Words without Thoughts Never to Heaven Go

*Katherine and I discuss fundraiser IFlurtz, a 'fun' relationship compatibility test which calls for the participation of the entire student body, and the complacency of students and teachers in providing this company with loads of personal information. We also discuss the seeming incompatibility of critical literacy in an innately non-critical environment (an environment that requires rules and complacency). How does this combination work? Do teachers truly want it to work? How are teachers being trained to deal with these possible moments of rebellion that they are essentially fostering via critical thought? (Field Notes, December 10, 2007)*

I conceived of and began this study under the impression that the English curriculum in Ontario public schools was limiting, and that the Media Studies component of that curriculum would not inspire critical thinking skills. I expected to find a depoliticized exploration of media forms, its role in communication, and an emphasis on the evils of media. I was not expecting to find an educator with a theoretically informed dedication to critical pedagogy and fearlessness toward controversial political and social issues. Furthermore, I was not expecting an engaged, critical and theoretical body of students. While I believed that all students could and should be prompted to exercise critical thinking, I expected to find those critically thinking students to be a minority in a classroom. I am pleased to have been surprised by my case study.

The Ontario Secondary School curriculum addresses power, politics and multiple social realities as the goals and tasks of Media Studies, and explicitly encourages critical thinking. However, while the goals of Media Studies do align with critical pedagogy, the term "critical" is used repeatedly while lacking a succinct definition. For example, the introductory chapter of the curriculum suggests that by reading a wide range of challenging texts students will become critical. Not only does this statement not provide a clue into what being critical is, it does not recognize the practice involved in developing a

critical pedagogy. In addition, the Critical Literacy expectations of Media Studies require students to identify biases in texts, and discuss how they relate to values, identity or power. Without a background in the practice of critical pedagogy, it is possible that this sort of statement could lead to over-simplistic or rigid analyses. For example, Ontario Media Studies could foster scholarship in line with Richard Braddock (1956), who sought to cultivate a certain taste for media students. Undefined, the term could prove frustrate teachers struggling to fulfill the curriculum. Yet at the same time, the curriculum's vagueness also allows for the kinds of engaged critical thinking I experienced in Katherine's classroom.

Looking to provincially approved course texts provides one way to interpret how Media Studies should be applied in practice. *Echoes 12* reveals a notably constricting and outmoded interpretation. Although it technically satisfies the category of Media Studies, its methods fail to promote critical thinking and it only supplies hegemonically determined politics. And while *Echoes 12* is still used today as a course text, it was published before the recent edition of the curriculum. Thus, I await the development of a provincially approved course text for English and Media Studies which takes up the tenants of Critical Literacy.

Ultimately, I would propose that, in the same way that the curriculum circumscribes the "media" as having specific yet multiple forms, "critical" should also be granted such an outline. In order to avoid frustration by the vagueness of the term, critical should be openly and self-reflexively described, though not prescribed. That is, because critical pedagogy is a dialogue, and must adapt to each situation, there should not necessarily be rigidly prescribed limits, but more generally described aims and examples.

Such a curriculum would allow educators without a theoretical background in critical literacy or critical pedagogy to be able to apply and interpret the requirement more readily.

Defining and applying critical pedagogy is no easy feat. However, it is even more complicated to apply it in an institutional culture which relies on rules, structure and order. There seems to be a contradiction between advocating a critical inquiry in an institution that is founded on order, obedience and hierarchy. In a discussion with Katherine, she recalled theorist Deborah Britzman who writes that “education and, so teachers as well, were either in service of critical pedagogy or the state apparatus” (Britzman, 2003, p.5). That is, there has been a distinct history of radical pedagogues who have tried to struggle within the unaccommodating institution. However, the recent mandates of the 2007 curriculum seem to complicate the division between critical thinking and conservative institutions. Yet if teachers do manage to create a space that fosters critical thought, by resisting traditional classroom institutional structures, like discipline obedience, and teacher/student hierarchies, they risk losing the cooperation of their students. Furthermore, there are external practices in educational institutions that seem to promote un-critical participation. For example, while I was at Rosenguild Secondary, the students were to be given “IFlurtz,” a compatibility test and a fundraiser for the school: in order for students to find their soul mate, they had to pay money for the results. This activity not only treated the politics of identity and sexuality as if they were obvious and static, it is a company collecting valuable information from a profitable consumer group. These sorts of activities, which call for uncritical participation, exist in the culture of secondary schools. While they are not fundamental to the school’s

structure, they reflect a culture of compliance. These IFlurtz hand-outs would make interesting media material to investigate, as opposed to an activity that students engage in as a fundraiser. It remains unclear whether a critical pedagogy can retain its intentions when incorporated into a system that it appears to contradict.

In thinking about institutionalizing a critical pedagogy, it is useful to consider the academic field of Cultural Studies, for both critical pedagogy and cultural studies seek to question and undermine the power and ideologies which support the foundation of institutions. Theorists Henry Giroux, David Shumway, Paul Smith and James Sosnoski (1985) were aware that radical critique could be “disabled and the mechanisms of both social and cultural reproduction enabled” when incorporated into traditional institutions (Giroux et al., 1985, p.647). I was able to discuss this article in a brief interview with Henry Giroux in 2006, to reflect on the developments of Cultural Studies. He believed that

Today, Cultural Studies does not address social issues as it was intended. Much of what has passed has depoliticized the work of Cultural Studies. While it does explore new social changes, it became fashionable. It became Madonna studies, popular culture, social movements, and scientific accounts of culture. ... Cultural Studies can be reduced to texts, meanings. (Giroux, interview, May 2006)

That is, Giroux reflects that while social and political critique was the aim of Cultural Studies, a reliance on stagnating ideas or popular articles of study can reduce cultural critique to hegemonic prescriptions. Although he also acknowledges that Cultural Studies can still function in a University setting, and can introduce important narratives against neoliberalism, but without self-reflexivity and a pledge to political and ever-changing scholarship, these studies can be “both a blessing and a curse.” Critical pedagogy and critical media education can take a cue from their critical predecessor. Without this sort

of reflection and dedication, Critical Literacy can easily become lip-service for those who would like to see education as a critical, engaging venture. Giroux's reflections on Cultural Studies also signal to the importance of teacher development workshops, which can help work through anxieties, practices and experiences that accompany critical media education.

Might traditional foundations of educational institutions shift if Critical Literacy is introduced in curriculum? At Rosenguild Secondary, the vast majority of the students were South Asian, while conversely the majority of educators at the institution appeared to be Caucasian. Since Katherine is actively engaging with questions of race in her English classroom, according to the curriculum's requirement, does that mean that Rosenguild is ready to openly debate the relations of race and power in their institution? Do educational, familial, or correctional institutions want to encourage critical agency to youth? Critical Literacy can certainly complicate the situation for those in positions of authority; however, the complication of power hierarchies need not be viewed as a threat. Katherine uses a critical pedagogy and maintains a mutual respect with the students. Her students shared, listened, and disagreed with her. And while Katherine's authority was not completely displaced – the students were being marked – it was inspiring to learn that traditional classroom structures could be successfully altered.

Katherine and her class of engaged, critical students suggest that critical Media Studies can function within an institution. In reading the media texts, they entertained political social issues in a dialogue. They openly questioned cultural conventions, including the institution in which they were housed, and created dynamic conversations.

Since this is a single case, I do not suggest that this class should be taken as a general model.

In creating these sorts of classrooms, it is important to consider teacher training. In conversations with Katherine, she noted that her dedication to and knowledge of critical pedagogy was the result of an independent pursuit. She spends time outside of school reading cultural and pedagogical theory, in accordance with her interests. She had also mentioned in her interview that of the professional development workshops offered to teachers, considerably few sessions touched on critical literacy or media literacy. In addition to the seemingly problematic lack of workshops on the subject, I wonder what the few workshops dedicated to Critical Literacy and Media Studies are teaching. How the content of these workshops is defined and who defines them? What approach do they teach in outlining “critical” and how are media texts to be treated? These questions warrant a study of their own.





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