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“Crash”-ing into Pop Culture in Dealing with Diversity: Adult Education and Critical Media Literacy about Movies and Television

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Abstract: This paper reports on the qualitative component of a study of what adult educators and adult learners “learn” about themselves and others based on portrayals of characters in film and television more generally, with particular attention to the recent Paul Haggis film “Crash.”

Popular culture and fictional entertainment media have an enormous influence on society. According to the A.C. Nielsen Company, the average person in the US watches about four hours of television per day, which amounts to about two months of nonstop TV-watching each year (Herr, 2001). In addition, watching movies is a large source of entertainment for many people worldwide. Whether in the genre of television sitcom or drama, or fictional stories in popular film, the entertainment media not only reflects the culture of the time, it also teaches us something about ourselves as we map new meaning onto our own experience based on what we see and relate to; it “teaches” us a lot about others different from ourselves based on race, gender, or sexual orientation through fictional means. In short, it has the power both to educate and “mis-educate.” Furthermore, as Alvermann and Hagood (2000) note, cultural texts such as movies and television do not only reflect aspects of the culture, they also contribute to shaping it. Given the relative lack of consideration in the field of adult education to pop culture, this paper reports the findings of the study of what adult educators and adult learners “learn” about themselves and others based on portrayals of characters in film and television more generally, paying particular attention to the recent Paul Haggis film *Crash*'s influence in potentially shaping culture as much as reflecting it.

Background and Theoretical Framework

While there's been a relative lack of consideration to the role of popular culture in adult learning and education, there's been much discussion of it among critical education scholars in general (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Giroux, 2002; Hooks, 1994; Yosso, 2002); the entire Fall 2003 issue of the *Harvard Educational Review* was devoted to the role of critical media education. The background literature related to this was discussed in some detail in an earlier AERC paper (Tisdell & Thompson, 2005), so is only touched on briefly here due to space limitations. In summary, critical media education scholars note the tendency of the media to reproduce structural power relations based on race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. They also argue that: (a) some media challenge such power relations in their portrayals of characters; (b) learners are consumers of entertainment media (which serves as a significant way that people construct knowledge about their own and others' identities and thus a significant source of “education”); (c) media is a source of pleasure, and it's not realistic to expect that learners not to engage with media; (d) they argue rather, that it is important to teach critical media literacy—how to analyze entertainment media through direct discussion of it in the classroom. While discussion of critical media literacy education is slowly beginning to make its way into the field as evidenced in recent conference papers on media and pop culture (Armstrong, 2005; Miller,

1999; Sandlin, 2005; Tisdell & Thompson, 2005) and journal articles (Guy, 2004; Jarvis, 2005) it is clear that more research is needed in this area, particularly in regard to diversity issues. The research discussed in this paper hopes to make a contribution to that end.

The theoretical framework for the study is grounded in the critical media literacy literature. Alvermann and Hagood (2000) note that there are four interrelated theoretical perspectives on critical media literacy depending on authors' disciplines and interests. First, some authors highlight the notion of pleasure, and on people's ability to reflect on pleasures associated with their involvement with and ability to choose or to create media. Second, others tend to focus on how media tend to reproduce or resist the dominant culture. Third, postmodernists focus more on how individuals and groups construct meaning differently depending on their interests, their positionality (or where they are positioned relative to the dominant culture), and on the historical and social context. Fourth, those coming more from feminist pedagogy perspectives focus more on how media functions "to produce certain relations of power and gendered identities that students may learn to use or resist as part of their everyday school experiences" (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000, p. 194). All of these interrelated perspectives inform this study, as does Yosso's summary of assumptions that should be made apparent to students in teaching how to analyze media. These include: (a) the media are controlled and driven by money; (b) media images are constructions—of directors and other media makers; (c) media makers bring their own experience with them in their construction of characters, including their perceptions of race, gender, class, etc.; (d) consumers of media construct their own meaning of media portrayals in light of their own background experience; (e) entertainment media such as movies and television, are a combination of moving visuals, sounds, and words that combine in facilitating meaning; (f) it is possible to acquire multiple literacies.

Methodology

The study was informed by a social constructivist paradigm of research in that, it is grounded in the social constructivist assumption that human beings do not "find" knowledge, but rather construct it. As Schwandt (2000) explains "We invent concepts, models and schemes to make sense of experience, and we continually test and modify these constructions in light of new experiences." And we do so "against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth"(p. 197). The entire study was comprised of a mixed method data collection, though this paper centers on the qualitative components of the study, which included three primary sources of data: individual interviews; focus groups; student comments made online or in writing about media, specifically about the movie *Crash*. Individual interviews with a purposeful sample of 15 (11 women, and 4 men; 5 people of color, 9 white; 5 of the participants were gay, lesbian, or bisexual) adult education faculty and students focusing more particularly on what types of entertainment media they view and why and what meaning they make of portrayal of characters. There were two focus groups (1 made up of 6 faculty, and 1 made up of 4 graduate students who had seen the movie *Crash* and wanted to discuss it, since the movie explicitly tries to explore issues related to race/ethnicity. Additionally, online conversations from two graduate level classes made up of 17 and 18 students respectively, and brief written comments from two classes of undergraduate classes following a discussion of *Crash* were ancillary source of data.

Findings

The following findings will be broken down into two main parts: findings based on individual interviews about discussions of media and general, and the findings about *Crash*.

Entertainment Media in General and Adult Education

All the participants indicated they watch television and movies largely for entertainment, and to relax and unwind. But there were four main inter-related findings of the qualitative data in regard to how participants believe the media they choose to watch affects their learning about themselves and others of different race, gender, sexual orientations, and in some cases, how they draw on it in their teaching. These findings focused on how their use of media can facilitate: (a) relaxation and a sense of pleasure; (b) finding alternative narratives for themselves; (c) expanded thinking about “others”; and (d) further interaction and analysis of social relations.

Relaxation and pleasure. Though it is no surprise, virtually all of the participants noted that they engage entertainment media to relax, and unwind, and as a source of pleasure. They all made comments similar to the one made by this participant: “Partly it is a drug. I mean when there is nothing else to do or when I need to unwind I can put the TV on and unwind”. In speaking about one particular shows she stated, “My goal is to just take it in. It is for pleasure. I just want to watch, get lost in it and think of the silliness of it.” Another was able to articulate some of how this pleasure works in relation to shows he watches, and enjoys shows that have elements of comedy but some depth of character development. He has a busy professional life and is dealing with “stuff like ageing parents, challenges at work.” He states that any show “has got to have a hook with out getting me down for me to be able to sit with it. If it is just dragging me through the mud, I’m not up for it.” The escape and comedic elements are important for him. The appeal for him of *Six Feet Under* which he watches is that it “is artfully done; it gives you that escape while making you think.” Indeed, there is pleasure in some form of escape.

Finding alternative narratives. Nearly all the participants recognized that the media they choose to watch related to their own personal story in some way, and helped them see alternative narratives in their own lives or for others in their communities. In particular, they talked about relating to characters or situations, and/or seeing new choices as a result of engagement with the text. Sometimes they identified with a specific scenario, which related to their professional, personal, or family lives in some way. For example, Teri discussed relating to the show *The West Wing* specifically because it related to her work place, and noted “my job as a mini West Wing...I can relate to the maneuvering, the strategy and chess match.” The lesbian and bisexual women in the study discussed particularly relating the show *The L Word*, which is a television drama on Showtime about a lesbian community in L.A. Barbara, a former coach, noted that she related to the tennis player on the show, and explained, “She is very closeted. I was very closeted in sports as well so that is why I pretty much can see that in myself and I did worry about what the sports world thought and what my next position would be job wise.”

Several interviewees specifically discussed seeing or exploring new choices as a result of engagement with particular media that expanded their own life stories or those of members of their communities. Hannah, a white professor in her early 40s, discussed the significance of the movie *Iris*, based on the life of Iris Murdoch, a British novelist and university professor that helped her make a choice between two relationships. “I got a vision of what I could have in my own life,” she explained which helped her make that choice. Participants also discussed the issue of representation of people of color in the entertainment media, and how this has changed somewhat over time, and provides many people with more positive options. While there was recognition that still there are often negative portrayals of black and Latino characters as criminals, the participants of color noted that there are many more positive portrayals of black characters in movies and television that helps people find alternative narratives.

Expanded thinking about “others.” Many of the participants discussed the role of television or film in helping them expand their understanding of those who were different from them based on race, gender, class, or sexual orientation. In some instances of looking at their own prejudices. Some described the role that the media played in actually changing their view on an issue. Todd, for example, discussed the power of seeing the movie *Philadelphia* in effecting a change in attitude about sexual orientation issues. Others discussed the role of the media, not so much in completely changing their view of issues surrounding a marginalized group in society, but in helping them understand the complexity of what living as a marginalized “other” is like. Greg, for example, considers himself quite liberal on race, gender, and sexual orientation issues, but discussed the role the HBO show *Six Feet Under* (a drama about the layered lives of the adult family members who own a funeral home,) played in understanding complexity, particularly of issues that gay or lesbian people might face in negotiating their lives. “I think it helps me gain a better understanding, perhaps, because it helps you get in the mind of the ‘other’ and how being the ‘other’ may affect decisions that you make you know – like what holidays you are around for and various things... it makes me think about things from a different angle.” Many of the participants also discussed how particular movies, especially the film *Crash*, helped them think about those of a different race and ethnicity in different ways, though this will be discussed later in this paper.

Stimulating interaction and further social and media analysis. Virtually all of the participants discussed the way the media stimulated interaction, both in their personal lives and in their workplaces or teaching practices. Many centered on the role of the media more directly and the way that it leads them to new thinking about social issues about those who are marginalized by race, gender, or sexual orientation, and how shows portraying such issues comes up at times in their daily interactions. They indicated that they came to new understanding of these issues through discussion of such shows with friends and colleagues, likely in a similar way that they seemed to come to new insights in the context of our interviews. For example, during the interview, both Todd and Hannah referred to the show *Desperate Housewives*, the currently very popular comedy-drama-satire, which features the upper-middle class happenings on the infamous “Wisteria Lane,” and provided some analysis of gender and race/ethnic portrayals on the show. Todd explained that so often on television it is Black and Latino characters that are portrayed as the criminals and drug dealers, and went on to note, “But the only difference with Carlos [the Latino character] is it is a *white* collar crime he is being charged with!” In this regard he was noting the tendency of the media to reproduce the dominant culture in many ways. Hannah brought up similar issues and also noted that in regard to gender this show resists dominant culture in some ways in its use of satire. “It stereotypes women in some very funny ways but the characters have developed some complexity along the lines that you see people both as a caricatures of the different modern day types of women. But then you see the character depth within.” She noted that it reproduces power relations as well: “I think it plays both sides of it for sure. Because it still doesn’t show options.”

Virtually all the interviewees discuss the media in their daily lives. Some of these educators also very intentionally draw on the media in their teaching to help learners analyze social relations and develop critical media literacy. Elaine provided a good example, and described an incident in a social issues class, where three white women and an African American male participated in an online discussion of the movie, *Hotel Rwanda*. The white women initially discussed how the movie led to a greater understanding of the situation between the Hutus and the Tutsis. But then Elaine explained that their discussion took a deeper turn when

the African American male brought up the issue of politics, race, civil war, and how there was a lot more going on there than genocide in the sense of one race trying to eliminate another. In explaining this Elaine noted: “He raised the whole issue of civil war and that the issue in Rwanda wasn’t as much one race against the other as portrayed in the movie; yes, it was the Hutus and the Tutsis, but there was a definite political agenda that really wasn’t well developed in the movie.” She went on to explain how it led to a discussion not only of the positive ways in which movies and film based on real events can lead to greater education about history and issues, though there are limitations due to time, space, politics that any one viewing can portray. But *discussion* of issues raised in movies can lead to greater understanding, and that ultimately this threaded discussion led to a connection to the present context. The discussion and analysis of it that helped people, as Greg suggests to see things including social issues, “from a different angle.”

“Crash” as Disturbing and Thought Provoking

A particular focus of this paper was the role of the movie *Crash*, specifically as it relates to race and ethnic relations, not only in L.A. where it was situated, but also across the nation, and how discussion of it can facilitate critical media literacy. Participants in this portion of the study were “assigned” to see the movie before discussing it in focus groups, in online discussion, or in class. Virtually all the participants found the movie disturbing, uncomfortable, but they also found it thought provoking. Both viewing and discussing it made them think about the complex nature of race/ethnic relations. Due to space limitations only two of the findings are discussed here.

Discomfort and reluctance of looking at one’s pain and prejudices. Many of the participants noted that the film called them to look inward at themselves in different ways, which was an uncomfortable process that brought up one’s pain and prejudices. Some of the people of color identified with what happened to one character or another, and had had similar painful experiences. In online discussions and in written comments, all talked about racism but most spoke of racism of people in general. Some used slightly more personal “we” language. For example, Leslie, a white woman and one of the online participants wrote, “Obviously, this film is about race. Talking about race and national origin is difficult to do. We must look inward and question the person we perceive ourselves to be.” A similar example of “we” language is a comment by Natalie, an African American woman, who wrote that that a significant aspect of the movie was “that prejudice is universal and comes in so many different shapes and sizes that at times it’s hard to recognize, especially in ourselves.” A couple of the participants however, did speak more personally about seeing their own prejudice. RaeAnn is an example, and noted: “I know I did not sleep well after I watched it. It brought so many issues that I probably do not recognize to the forefront that I almost fought against the reality in my mind at the start of the movie. It disturbs me that people treat others like this and it caused me to take a deeper look at myself and my prejudices.”

New insights through discussion. The movie and discussion of it made participants come to new insights not only about race/ethnic relations but to some extent gender. There was much discussion especially by the women of the scene where the white police officer molests the upper-middle class black woman while her husband looks helplessly on. This discussion to some extent led to a consideration of the intersection of gender and race. There was also much discussion about use of symbol, consideration of the director’s intent, and the fact that a message of the film is that no one is all good, and no one is all bad. All the participants noted the power

of the film in peeling back layer after layer, and many wrote comments like “Another aha moment!” or “Another WOW here!” in the discussion. Clearly, in light of its recent Oscar win and the depth of the discussion and engagement by participants in this study, it will have at least an effect on the consciousness of many who see it. The extent it impacts behavior remains to be seen.

Conclusions

It is clear based on the findings of the study that people do construct knowledge in powerful ways, but not in ways that are fully intentional through engagement with the media. They also construct much deeper meaning through discussion and interaction of media that can lead to greater understanding. While more research needs to be done related to how media affects people’s thinking about diversity, clearly bringing it into adult education settings and analyzing it helps people as Freire suggests, to “learn to read the world.”

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