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POPULAR CULTURE AS PEDAGOGY: RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF ADULT EDUCATION

Kaela Jubas, Nancy Taber, and Tony Brown (Eds.). Sense Publishers, Boston, 2015, 168 pages.

Adult educators are increasingly interested in engaging with popular culture (or pop culture) in their teaching. The chapters in this volume explore topics related to this trend; authors take on analyses of various pop culture forms (including film, television, and literature) and conceive of the role of pop culture in adult learning in various ways. This volume also develops a dialectic between pop culture *as* pedagogy—analyzing how adults learn about their social world from pop culture texts—and pop culture *in* pedagogy—where pop culture texts are used more formally to teach adults to deconstruct the social messages contained within them.

Primarily, the nine chapters focus on pop culture in the first sense; they deconstruct pop culture texts as public pedagogy occurring largely outside the classroom. Authors engage with each text as an object that “both reflects and informs reality” (p. 1). In the sense that pop culture informs reality, authors argue that close and critical readings of pop culture texts are useful to the field of adult education because these texts are actively (though informally) teaching viewers, readers, or those discussing them about the terms of their participation in public and private life. That pop culture reflects reality suggests that readers and viewers also participate in the development of the discourses reflected in these texts and that examining them may illuminate aspects of social relations that are assumed and of which we are not always aware.

Examples from this volume include Robin Redmon Wright and Gary L. Wright’s analysis of the public pedagogy of The Doctor in *Doctor Who*, Elissa Odgren’s analysis of pedagogies of resistance in *The Lego Movie*, Pamela Timanson and Theresa Schindel’s examination of workplace learning in *Nurse Jackie*, Nancy Taber’s examination of gender in the television series *Once Upon a Time*, and Christine Jarvis’s inquiry into femininity and womanhood in the *Twilight* series as juxtaposed with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Each of these chapters has a slightly different focal point related to pedagogy. For example, Wright and Wright’s piece looks at The Doctor as pedagogue, Odgren looks at viewing *The Lego Movie* as a potentially transformative learning moment, and Timanson and Schindel examine what the presentation of teaching and learning in *Nurse Jackie* illuminates about how our society understands these practices.

Following an analysis of the pedagogical function of each of these texts, authors call for adult educators to bring pop culture texts into the adult classroom. Such a move, they argue, develops adult learners’ deconstruction skills, which theoretically enables a more

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critical consumption of pop culture outside of the classroom. Each of the texts examined in this volume is complicated in its own way; all texts both challenge and reinforce hegemonic constructions of gender, class, and race. Authors argue that adult learners must have the opportunity to engage critically with them in formal settings (presumably under the guidance of a critical adult educator).

Essays by Astrid Treffry-Goatley on representations of HIV in South African cinema and by Tony Brown on representations of teachers in American cinema also look at pop culture as pedagogy, but take a slightly different approach. In their analyses, Treffry-Goatley and Brown position pop culture as produced more directly by individuals (producers and directors) and organizations (governments, foundations, corporations, and other investors).¹ These analyses thus examine the mechanisms through which these cultural products are produced within a particular social and political context, specifically neo-liberalism. Brown, in a sweeping look at historical and contemporary representations of teachers in US films, is critical of contemporary representations of teachers as harrowed and ineffectual (at best); where the “hero” is pushing for the marketization of schools, viewers must be critical of the influence of the market in the production of such texts. Treffry-Goatley examines films about HIV after 2004 in South Africa as situated in the context of a larger government awakening to the dire effects of the virus on its citizens and to the lack of available education about and treatment for HIV. Filmmakers and funders of these films are engaged in deliberate, though often problematic, acts of public pedagogy.

Kaela Jubas’s chapter on the “ghostly figure” of the nurse is unique to this volume in that it extends an analysis of television-as-educator to examine how real (rather than hypothetical or assumed) viewers respond to these texts. She uses the popular medical drama *Grey’s Anatomy* as a case study, examining how Canadian nursing students understand themselves within this popular representation of health care systems. Jubas finds that students are neither passive nor universal in the way that they consume *Grey’s Anatomy*; they are often critical of the show’s representations of nurses and tend to see themselves in the show’s leading (though misleading) doctor roles rather than in its underdeveloped nurse roles.

Taken together, these chapters engage with important questions about both the role and form of pop culture analyses in the field of adult education. This volume asks, what hegemonic messages are coded into pop culture texts? Brown and Treffry-Goatley’s chapters add, how are the messages embedded in pop culture texts participating in a particular political and material context? Jubas’s chapter asks, how are these messages taken up and read by consumers of pop culture? As the authors suggest, critical analyses of pop culture texts, such as those provided in this volume, may be useful to adult educators seeking to support students’ development of tools for deconstructing the messages that these texts challenge and reinforce.

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1 Of course, these actors are not acting in a vacuum but influence and are influenced by broader hegemonies of which they are not always aware.