Title
The Days I First Learned I had the Right to See, Not Only to Watch

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0zk4r7dd

Author
Ohannesian, Stephanie

Publication Date
2010-10-01
The Days I First Learned I Had the Right to See, Not Only Watch

BY STEPHANIE OHANNESIAN
The Days I First Learned I Had the Right to See, Not Only Watch

BY STEPHANIE OHANNESIAN

It seems harder and harder these days to find individual conviction in relationships pertaining to current societal events, given that so many voices on so many issues go unheard. Convincing people that I did in fact have a point of view on various topics would, I thought, require effort and commitment to become a fully fledged expert on a particular topic. It would also require hoping that the big picture on huge global issues would somehow at some point find its solution, at least in my own mind. The irony, however, in this way of thinking is that the everyday life-altering things each of us witnesses and experiences are in fact the cornerstones of so many of these global problems. Our vision as individuals, and as students, and how we choose to interpret what is given to us—be it on the street, on TV, or in the classroom—is in fact up to us. If we choose to ignore, for example, current toxic standards of beauty or choose to walk by an obviously needy person digging through trash, we give up our power and allow them to continue. One of the best ways to start on this journey to self-empowerment seems to be in finding other people who are also interested in such questions. By finding like-minded people, we can begin to discuss and debate a variety of dominant cultural beliefs and practices, which the majority seems to accept as the norm (or what the esteemed cultural studies expert, Stuart Hall, has called “common sense”). In other words, there is a pressing need for courses or workshops that provide students (of the classroom and of the world) with the opportunity to express their own concerns and help them to gain the necessary critical skills.

My first experience with finding and using my own voice was through Dr. Rhonda Hammer’s class on critical media literacy. She gave us free reign to think of a topic we wanted to explore, one that pushed our buttons or one perhaps was not given proper attention in our estimation. My group (consisting of three female students) began brainstorming. We soon realized we all had had jobs in the restaurant industry, had tried our hand at show business, and had grown up in Los Angeles. Those commonalities raised the issue of food and affluence in L.A: the cultural obsession with thinness and the neediness of individuals and families who don’t get enough healthy nourishment. I was intrigued but skeptical about our topic, Dr. Hammer nevertheless trusted our passion about a society where people not being fed for two very different reasons. After interviewing experts in the fields of psychology, nutrition, and media culture and spending the day with a man by the name of Bob, who had gained 150 pounds during his first year living on the streets because of the fatty foods available in shelters,
we completed *The Great Imbalance*. No one had taken the time to put the two issues together: starving to achieve a standard of beauty and consuming unhealthy food because you have no other resources are both toxic to health and well being. Seeing the juxtaposition for the first time both touched and shocked the members of our audience.

After the release of *Twilight*, Dr. Hammer asked students to take a look at why this series about vampires and eternal love had become such a popular culture phenomenon. Our goal with this documentary entitled *Bite Me* was to find out what the audience was looking for and was getting from the books and the films. Fans seemed to be yearning for undying love, commitment, family support, and connection, and we captured these yearnings in our film. Many of the people we interviewed spoke about feeling alienated and about wanting to feel a connection to something. We never would have thought that such telling statements would have come out via a documentary on a film about vampires, but they did.

Her encouragement gave us the confidence to try and make a strong statement. Learning how to view media and society critically gave us the chance to control what we, as citizens, are normally spoon-fed. This process also allowed created a forum for our peers to be challenged as well. Many of documentaries that have been produced under Dr. Hammer’s tutelage have been met with gasps and “a-ha” moments from the audience because they are seeing, perhaps for the first time, something that have been seen many times without really seeing it. Being taught how to see in this way and having the opportunity to put my vision into action have been life-changing experiences for me. Given similar opportunities, everyone can gain the power to understand the underlying realities of what we are all exposed to every day. Developing critical media literacy is a basis for making choices, becoming aware, and avoiding becoming the victim of mass media and the spin doctors of the media machine. If we each take responsibility for what we will and will not accept, those that have the power will have no choice but to listen.

Stephanie Ohannesian graduated with honors from UCLA in 2009 with a B.A in Women’s Studies: Media and Social Construction of Gender. She has been a member of Alpha Gamma Sigma Honor Society as well as Alpha Gamma Epsilon where she began her volunteer work with Union Station Foundation, Feminist Majority Foundation as well as with The Courtwatch Project through the National Council of Jewish Women. She is in the process of applying to law school where she plans on continuing her studies in human rights law with an emphasis on women’s rights and hopes to combine legal work with public service announcement filmmaking.