Title
The Power of Production: Reflections on CM 278

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Author
Caban, Heather L.

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CERTAINLY THERE ARE times when every educator wishes that they possessed the master remote for media culture so that with just a push of a button they were able to turn it off, or at least choose the channel. Unfortunately, the ubiquity of the media and its inextricable imprint on students makes the possibility of such control impossible. As a result, I firmly believe that educators must embrace the media in their pedagogical practices, recognizing its possibilities and preparing students for their encounters. Given the omnipresence of media in our everyday lives and that as Douglas Kellner describes it in Media Culture (Routledge, 1995), “media culture is now the dominant form of culture which socializes us and provides materials for identity in terms of social reproduction and change,” I advocate the adoption of a critical media literacy pedagogical approach.

Much of my beliefs and understandings regarding critical media literacy were informed by the theories and activities that were part of Dr. Rhonda Hammer’s course. I recall the excitement that I felt seeing the course listed. It became the focal point of my schedule and I remember choosing my other courses in relation to this one. It drew me because it was one of the few, if not only, courses that professed to explore the production aspect of media. A staunch proponent of critical media literacy, I had never seen it in practice, and I hoped that the course would make the theories come alive. Giving life to theories, I soon learned, requires long hours and considerable cooperation. This one course demanded as much work as my

I find television very educational. Every time someone switches it on I go into another room and read a book.

—Groucho Marx
I tired to zoom in on a person’s face, I instead found myself peering into their pupil. Attempting to pan the camera slowly, I jerked it too quickly. Once I was introduced to the tripod, I was at least able to get a steady shot. After lessons on lighting and camera positioning, my partner and I became more confident. Though our backs ached from lugging our equipment around campus for practice sessions, we were prepared for the first assignment. We were asked to shoot a short videoclip that demonstrated our newfound, albeit basic, abilities. We framed ours as a public service announcement highlighting the importance of water preservation. Not yet Michael Moore, but in our own minds it was a huge success.

The crescendo of the course was to create a minidocumentary. Each group explores a topic of personal importance and to provide a countervoice to existing media representations or lack thereof. Encouraged to use media to critique media, we were provided with examples. During class we watched clips of radical documentary filmmaker Emile de Antonio’s In the Year of the Pig (1968), which relied heavily on montage editing and media clips, including a diversity of archive-based segments, to create a narrative of critique. Through this process, de Antonio was able to expose and decode ideologies for his audience. Michael Moore’s documentaries, also viewed in class, employ a similar method. The fact that both rely so heavily on archival/media footage demonstrates that meaningful documentaries might not necessarily require exorbitant budgets; having ingenuity and determination to secure footage can play an even greater role. Sites such as YouTube and Google images could now be viewed as valuable resources. As a requisite for incorporating existing media representations, we also became well versed in a little something known as “fair use” (a legal doctrine related to the use of copyrighted material).

Our documentary, A Generation of Change: The 2008 Presidential Election of Barack Obama, explored the historic nature of the most recent election. Because my partner believed that age was being overlooked in the narrative of the election, we used this as a guiding lens. Based on what was discussed in class, we chose to keep our storyline open. We asked each interviewee the same five questions. After that, we decided to enter a more naturalistic, free question format. I recalled the class lecture on cinema verité, in which we viewed Mick Jagger stripped of his cockiness while watching the video of a shooting that took place at a Rolling Stones’ concert. I was amazed by its rawness and fascinated by a process that could coax this out of someone so normally image conscious. Through our interviews, given their structured format and purpose, could not be placed in the same genre, I really hoped that we might be able to get the same flash of intimacy. One of the directors commented that in his work, he “wanted what we got, not got what we wanted”; my partner and I operated similarly— in that we did not preselect a narrative and hoped to get multiple interpretations.
Filming the interview turned out much more complex than I had expected. In many cases the setup took longer than the interview. Microphones had to be correctly placed and operational, the lighting had to be appropriate, the background had to be nondistracting, and so on. In addition, interviewees needed time to become comfortable with interviewer and camera. The finished products that we had seen onscreen looked so effortless and so polished. It was not until the end of our first interview that we understood that elements that seemed trivial, like the placement of wall hangings and the positioning of lampshades, could make the difference between an interview appearing credible rather than comical.

Impressed by Dr. Hammer’s own “We didn’t start the fire” montage, as well as those in Moore’s Farenheit 9/11, and amazed at montage’s potential for compacting pages of ideas into seconds of video, we were certain that we wanted to open our video with one. Collecting and converting images into compatible iMovie format was time consuming, though we found that it was much easier to have too many to choose from than too few. My partner felt an emotional investment in the Black Eyed Peas’ song “Where is the Love?”; so, we attempted to find images to match the lyrics. Since our theme was “change,” we wanted to have black-and-white images dialogue with color photos, effectively juxtaposing the past with the present. Though the mood of our piece was meant to be reflective, we realized that some humor would be necessary, which is why we included John McCain’s “face of anger” in the middle of the montage. Beginning with a montage focused on lack of love, respect, and dignity, we ended with a brief montage of victory entirely in color. This represents a full circle. In addition, the “Yes, We Can” song that accompanies the closing montage is sung by will.i.am, one of the members of Black Eyed Peas. The theme is an end that would not be possible without the beginning, a full cycle.

Editing the documentary was the most challenging, yet perhaps the most rewarding, part of the process, in that it was where the message and artistic vision were realized. The entire path up to this point had been a process of experimentation and discovery and this was no different. We began the shooting of the documentary with a loose framework and now it was time to piece things together. My partner agreed to embark on the first round of edits, producing a rough cut. Performing what to me seemed some kind of sleight of hand, she transformed our file full of clips into something comprehensible, even inspiring. In order to arrive at this point, I know that she must have imbibed numerous jugs of coffee and endured several sleepless nights.

After this initial editing, we met and discussed changes. First, we experimented with the ordering of the images. Having the visuals match the audio was essential to the overarching message and the entertainment experience. When constructing the beginning and ending montages, we had to be especially meticulous, as every line had one or more corresponding images. Getting the sequence right meant listening to the song over and over while shifting, adding, and deleting images. The images, so strongly imprinted, still appear in my head whenever I hear the songs. Sound levels and effects became another important element. My partner came up with the idea of the sound of footsteps with a completely black screen at the beginning. We liked the idea so much that added the same effect at the end. The footsteps trod on, signaling that change has started but is not complete. It is ongoing.

Forced to acknowledge the encroaching due date, we agreed on a final cut and were ready to transfer it to a DVD for the public screening. Uncooperative machines and defective discs caused last-minute panic; upon burning the final copy, however, we felt a subdued sense of accomplishment. Although still uncertain about how others would receive it and knowing that we could have done even better with more time, we felt sure that we had created something in which our own voices resonated.

We are most proud of the segment relating to media representations. A teenage interviewee mocking the ridiculousness of the fact that many Americans get their political news from “fundits” is juxtaposed with clips of Matt Lauer citing statistics about the influence of Stephen Colbert and John Stewart on young voters and a near 80-year-old who claims these outlets are the only ones that she allows herself the pleasure of viewing. As a sequence, it provides a dig at the media and a bit of levity. We also enjoyed some of the commentaries about Reverend Jer-
Emiah Wright. His was the only representation that all four interviewees brought up as both-ersome, and their comments represented an important critique of the media and a “talking back” for us. Most mainstream media outlets portrayed Rev. Wright in a negative light, showing reactions of “normal (white) folk” being appalled, with few images of non African-Americans defending Wright.

Our project ended up much differently than we had envisioned. The fact that Obama won the presidency drove us to reorient and re-examine the message that we were exploring. To be honest, our mood had changed dramatically, from criticizing media representations out of a fear of a repeat of George Bush’s two elections, to, though cliché, a mood of almost astonished hope. In a sense this experience made it all the more clear that a media driven by immediate events is inevitably shrouded in ideology.

Dr. Hammer’s course fulfilled its objective twofold and was one of the most meaningful experiences of my graduate studies at UCLA. I draw on the concepts and skills learned throughout her course daily, as I teach English Conversation to Education majors at a university in South Korea. Making a significant break from the existing curriculum, I have designed my course around the topic of “globalization,” with an emphasis on the role of global media and new media technology. Students are asked to critique media representations employing a variety of lenses. Using a Facebook fan page for the course, they openly engage in weekly discussions, sharing links to videos, news stories, and images for critical discussion, which is continued during class. For many, this is their first experience in analyzing media. Several students have approached me with questions concerning additional methods of including media in the classroom, and I have responded to them with examples taken from Dr. Hammer’s course. Amazed when told that we were expected to create our own documentaries, more than one has asked me to include a production aspect in my course for next semester. And, Dr. Hammer has given me invaluable advice concerning my dissertation. She has encouraged me to use the observations gained from the course that I am teaching, in the in-class and online discussions, the video analysis assignments, and the incidental feedback have provided a rich amount of data. Without the experience of this course and Dr. Hammer’s direction, I don’t believe that my dissertation focus would be as meaningful.

This class has served as a remarkable model of how a critical media literacy course should be taught. The way in which the syllabus coherently wove together theory and production made it the first example of praxis that I have seen in a UCLA classroom. Uncovering the mystery in the production of media messages has made me realize my own potential for creating media that has impact. All of the final videos produced could easily be used as educational material or components of a curriculum embodying the tenets of social justice. To be honest, I am not sure if I will ever again make a documentary, though a webpage or short video clip may not be far out of reach; however, I feel confident that I now have the ability to help others to start their way.

Heather L. Caban is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Social Sciences and Comparative Education in the Graduate School of Education at UCLA. She is currently conducting research in the area of new media literacies and globalization in Seoul, South Korea.