

The Pedagogy of Urban Media Literacy

Ann Hetzel Gunkel, Columbia College Chicago, IL

Gunkel, Ph.D. is Professor of Humanities and Cultural Studies. Her teaching-research agenda includes urban media and culture, Polish American studies, curriculum development and educational multimedia design.

Abstract

This paper is derived from my experience in teaching "Urban Images in Media and Film" at Columbia College Chicago. The course employs an interdisciplinary humanities approach to the study of the city, analyzing not only how images and meaning are shaped by the media arts but also how students can become empowered through everyday and media practice. The course, therefore, facilitates a critical space for self-reflection on the teaching and learning of media in the urban setting and its relationship to the development of critical thinking skills in the liberal education curriculum. The paper has two parts. In the first section, I explore the general pedagogical issues in teaching Urban Images. In the second section, I explain the structure of one unit of the course, emphasizing the pedagogical strategies for empowering students by cultivating critical, counterhegemonic artistic and cultural responses to mediated images.

An Overview of the Course and its Pedagogy

The catalog description of the course states that "Urban Images in Media and Film is a survey of how metropolitan life is portrayed by film, television, the press, and other media. Students will discover how the city is depicted by artists, writers, and filmmakers to convey a philosophy of urban life. Students will also learn to analyze film and documentaries and discuss ethnicity, migration, crime, and fear of the city." Through their work in class discussion, short papers, examination, projects, and term papers, students demonstrate success in meeting the following learning outcomes: "Upon completion of the course, students should: demonstrate a base of historical and sociological knowledge about urbanism; demonstrate familiarity with a core body of film and video concerning the city; demonstrate the ability to offer informed and compelling written and oral critique of urban issues in media; demonstrate knowledge of and critical integration of a body of writing on urban issues."

This paper, and the course, argues that it is the role of the liberal education teacher not only to show students of arts and media that they are responsible for the images they create but to provide the skills by which to understand and analyze their own practices of making meaning. Whether or not students themselves hail from an urban center, the course conveys the central role of such images in shaping public policy and opinion. Further, while the messages conveyed by those cultural forms are not always consistent or uniform, the themes are largely negative (Fischer, 1984). As the industrial city evolved, "it also emerged as a discursive construction...a charged imaginative creation of fantasy, terror, and desire...[T]he city was cast as the necessary mirror or American civilization, and fundamental categories of American reality--whiteness, heterosexuality, domestic virtue, feminine purity, middle-class respectability--were constituted in opposition to what was said to exist in cities" (Orsi, 1999, p. 5). Therefore, we practice asking questions about the urban politics of images and representation. We investigate not only anti-urban bias and urban stereotypes but also the strategies of resistance to these dominant views, emphasizing our own political accountability as citizens and creators of culture. "Central to a pedagogy of representation is providing students with the opportunities to deconstruct the mythic notion that images, sounds, and texts merely express reality" (Giroux, 1994, p. 88). When we study the urban politics of the popular media genre referred to as "Reality TV," students are faced head on with their faith in the "real." The class session in which we study the production codes and ideological values governing programs such as "Cops," "America's Most Wanted," and the various ubiquitous newsmagazines, is almost always a breakthrough moment for student self-reflection. Students begin to uncover the ways in which video realism is a formatting strategy that

tells a very particular urban story (Andersen, 1995). Above all, they become engaged in the vital enterprise of learning not only how but that the real is mediated, produced rather than given. As Trinh T. Minh-ha (in Giroux, 1994) has remarked, "To address the question of the production relations...is endlessly to reopen the question: How is the real ...produced? Rather than catering to it, striving to capture and discover its truth as a concealed or lost object, it is therefore important also to keep asking, how is truth being ruled" (p. 88)?

In bringing the tools of the liberal arts to the critical analysis of images in the everyday world, I have tried to focus on "demystifying the act and process of representing by revealing how meanings are produced within relations of power that narrate identities through history, social forms, and modes of ethical address that appear objective, universally valid, and consensual" (Giroux, 1994, p. 87). As art and media practitioners, our students are already predisposed to a healthy skepticism regarding images. They are open to learning the language of critique, especially in terms of the hegemonic nature of mass media. What they seem to have little recognition for are the complex ways in which they, as both consumers and creators of culture, can resist such dominant representations. Insofar as the core of Columbia's mission is the education of students "who will author the culture of their times," the larger challenge is to provide our students with a sense of possibility and alternatives (Columbia College Chicago Catalog, 1997, p. 5). In the remainder of this paper, I will explore a variety of everyday artistic and cultural practices in order to understand the possibility for and nature of counterhegemonic media practice.

Artistic and Cultural Responses to Mediated Images

In choosing the focus for this paper, I've selected one unit of the Urban Images course, entitled "Little Cities: (Im)Migrant Communities of Resistance," which comes at a mid-point in our fourteen week semester and is designed to shift the emphasis of study and implicate students in a new way. The instructional materials include scholarly essays, personal essays, and mediated images covering topics of vernacular architecture, foodways, and ethnic religious festivals. Central to this strategy is recognition of the diverse makeup of Columbia College. "Columbia College's student body is representative of the rich diversity of a modern metropolitan area," with almost forty percent of students coming from minority groups (Columbia College Chicago Catalog, 1997, p. 10). Because so many of the prominent urban stereotypes are linked to the denigration of urban peoples, especially immigrants and migrants, this unit focuses on the self-defining and self-affirming everyday practices of such peoples. Typical of this anti-immigrant sentiment is the famous Plan of Chicago, devised by groundbreaking architects Burnham and Bennett. Their 1909 Plan (in Campbell & Kean, 1997) suggests that the "time has come to bring order out of the chaos incident to rapid growth, and especially to the influx of people of many nationalities without common traditions or habits of life" (p. 164). Commenting on this statement, Campbell and Kean (1997) point out that Burnham and Bennett's language indicates that "the most well-intentioned [urban] planning has within it precise ideological purposes, in this case, to control the immigrant masses and prevent disorder on the streets" (pp. 164-5). Because such views dominate not only mediated images but also texts of urban planning, literature, and journalism, the course materials for Unit Seven emphasize the resistant practices of urban immigrants and migrants.

Alongside this content emphasis, the unit places particular value on pedagogic strategies for cultivating counterhegemonic artistic and cultural responses to mediated images.[1] It attempts to address a pedagogical problem which erupted in a variety of ways, best addressed by one student's despairing comment in class. She, a student filmmaker, had been doing a fine job of analyzing the many stereotypes of urban places