Toward a Playful Pedagogy: Popular Culture and the Pleasures of Transgression

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In defining popular culture as inherently pleasurable, including the pleasures of transgression, the author argues that while art teachers now critique popular visual culture for its often-dubious ideologies, they are yet to come to terms with its transgressive pleasures. Teachers fail to engage with its carnivalesque, subversive qualities because they conflict with the rationality upon which schools are founded. Transgression involves challenging teachers’ authority, and its oftentimes-reactionary nature raises serious moral dilemmas. However, unless the transgressive nature of popular culture is acknowledged, critique will not engage with students’ affective investments and will be dismissed as irrelevant. The considerable experience of media educators in the United Kingdom suggests that popular culture must be approached through a playful pedagogy that negotiates moral ambiguity, accepts that students’ reactionary and progressive attitudes often fold into one another, and leavens critical theory with fun and pleasure.

Many K-12 art teachers are now addressing popular culture in their classrooms. They have critically examined, for example, ethnicity (Cummings, 2006), gender (Gillespie Perkins, 2006), consumerism (Stokrocki, 2001), beauty, anorexia, bullying, divorce (Plummer-Rolhoff, 2006), teen pregnancy, crime (Lovett, 2006), and violence (Chung, 2006). Through their own visual productions, K-12 students have talked back to media representations of national politics (Tavin & Toczydlowska, 2006), celebrity (Briggs, 2007), family photography, sitcoms (Cummings, 2006), music videos (Taylor, 2000), and cigarette advertising (Chung, 2005).\(^1\)

While many positive contributions are claimed for teaching popular culture—including student motivation and students’ more complex imagery\(^2\)—virtually no attention has been paid to the contradiction between the irrational, often-subversive nature of popular culture and the rationality normally required within formal education. If one of the primary pleasures of popular culture derives from its transgressive nature, how are teachers to react when students in schools produce work that is either utterly inane or politically incorrect? Art teachers interested in studying transgressive artists (e.g., Darts, 2004; Darts, Tavin, Sweeny & Derby, 2008; Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008), including in K-12 classrooms (e.g., Darts, 2006; Tavin & Toczydlowska, 2006; Springgay, 2008), is one thing; it is altogether different when students transgress.\(^3\) The former is contained within the rationalism of critical critique and constrained by the normative expectations of schooling; the latter breaks loose from both. When students produce work that is just plain silly, or ostensibly sexist, racist, homophobic, vulgar, offensive to people with physical disabilities, and so on, what are teachers to do? So far, art teachers have dealt with popular culture largely by avoiding such dilemmas; it is as though they do not exist. But, if

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\(^{1}\) For a comprehensive review, see Duncum, 2007.

\(^{2}\) Other contributions include the development of critical thinking, exploring identity, learning the conventions of popular genres and postmodern concepts, and teachers learning more about their students (See Duncum, 2007 for a review).

\(^{3}\) Transgressive art cuts across basic norms or mores, and it often causes offense or is considered shocking. According to Julius (2003) and Mey (2007), transgressive art falls (continued)
teachers are truly to engage with the popular culture of their students, the pleasures of transgression cannot long be ignored.

I contend in this article that art education has much to learn from media education, the prime focus of which is mass media. In the United Kingdom, studying popular culture has been a part of school curriculum since the 1930s (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994), and today, media specialist schools are able to develop pedagogy in-depth. Moreover, for over two decades media education classroom practice has been subjected to a sustained research endeavor (e.g., Buckingham, Banaji, Burn, Carr, Cranmer & Willett, 2005; Sefton-Green & Seop, 2007), so that a considerable body of knowledge exists about popular culture pedagogy. Many countries are now modeling their own programs upon this knowledge (Buckingham, et al., 2005). In this article, I look to media educators to suggest directions for future developments in pedagogy since art education, especially in the United States, is still at an early, experimental stage in developing a pedagogy for popular culture, and some reported practices appear to be at odds with what media education has found to be both defensible and effective.

Popular Culture and Transgression

This article acknowledges a crucial, paradoxical characteristic of popular culture; namely, that it reinforces dominant social values and so contributes to social cohesion while simultaneously offering pleasures associated with resistance to and even subversion of the social order (Storey, 2003). Popular culture is both conformist and transgressive in nature. Moreover, these opposed tendencies frequently operate within the one site, as if folding into one another. Conformity and transgression mark the mass culture of television and cinema, advertising, magazines, and so on which is produced by salaried or outsourced professionals, and often now working on behalf of global corporations (Storey, 2003). Mass culture is sometimes called the dominant culture because it is closely tied to dominant forms of economic production, and it tends to convey the principle values of a society based on that economic system (Williams, 1977). Thus, popular culture is a rational expression of widely-shared social assumptions. In a consumer economy, the dominant message of mass culture is to consume, though many other mainstream messages about class, gender, ethnicity, and so on are also embedded, all of which has the effect of reinforcing social inequalities (Barnard, 1998). This is despite the fact that mass popular culture also offers fun and pleasure as well as an appearance of liberality by including transgression.

This fusion of conformity and transgression applies not only to popular culture as mass culture; it is equally true of popular culture as a synonym for folk or vernacular culture, the culture of ordinary people (Storey, 2003). And transgressive tendencies apply as much to ordinary people as audiences of mass culture as they do to ordinary people as producers of their own cultural artifacts. People everywhere negotiate what meanings they take from mass culture, often employing subversive readings that undercut intended meaning in what Sefton-Green and Seop (2007) call “creative media consumption” (p. 839). Equally,
many people produce work of their own, often derived from mass culture, in what Jenkins (1992) calls “textual poaching” (p. 1). For example, today this includes tattooing (Blair, 2007), children’s bedrooms (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002), music videos (Jenkins, 1992), fan cultures (Wilson, 2003), and 70 million blogging sites (Keen, 2007), not to mention social networking Internet sites and YouTube. Either as creative media consumption or through their own productions, the popular culture of ordinary people is often subversive as officially approved culture is turned on its head in a carnivalesque celebration of hedonistic irrationality (Langman, 2008). People’s own productions often involve the exploration of alternative sexualities (Jenkins, 1992), the grotesque, the obscene, and the completely nonsensical (Langman, 2008). The latter is variously referred to as “metaphoric rubbish” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p. 21) or, in Fielder’s (1975) words, “privileged insanity” in the face of “the crypto-puritans” (pp. 36, 41). Where the dominant social discourse, including that of schools, is one of “purposefulness, economy, rationality and productivity,” the carnivalesque involves a symbolic inversion that celebrates what prima facie appears to be “sheer purposelessness” (Manga, 2003, pp. 193, 179). Mass culture is ever seeking opportunities to appropriate the vernacular for its own commercial purposes, and people’s own culture feeds off mass culture so that, while distinct, a dynamic, symbiotic relationship exists between the two (Storey, 2003).

I contend that while art teachers now are attempting to deal with popular culture by subjecting it to a critical lens, they are ignoring popular culture as irrational fun and pleasure seeking, and that to fully address popular culture in the classroom we need to develop pedagogy that acknowledges fun and pleasure. Art educational approaches to popular culture are often altogether serious affairs, having an earnest quality that belies the pleasure, the sheer fun, and the utter lack of seriousness for which popular culture is, in a word, popular (Duncum, 2007). Thus, to date, one of the chief defining characteristics of popular culture is missing in action from reports by art teachers in their approaches to popular culture.4

**Transgressive Pleasure**

Of course, students have fun with their teachers, but this is fun under the control of teachers; it is fun with a purpose and thus more like Barthes’ (1975) *plaisir* than *jouissance*. *Plaisir* refers to the pleasure one has in relating to the social order, a conservative and accommodating, conformist pleasure. It is an adults’ view of pleasure. But, as every teacher—and every student—knows, there is another kind of pleasure, that of *jouissance*, an intense, blissful ecstasy produced by evading and transgressing the social order (Kenway & Bullen, 2001). This is the pleasure children have in shocking their parents and teachers.

When children are constantly under pressure to conform to adult demands, including to grow up and not to act like children, children’s own culture becomes one of resistance and transgression: inane, risqué, scatological, and politically incorrect (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002). Through their self-initiated drawings, children frequently adopt an ironic, even sarcastic, attitude...
towards media representations. They play topsy-turvy with conventional gender roles (Wilson & Toku, 2004), produce grotesques in response to sexualized media stereotypes (Ivashkevich, 2008), relish depicting violence and cruelty in humorous ways, and celebrate the most ridiculous aspects of mass media (Duncum, 1987). Now, children are using social networking sites like Facebook as well as video sharing sites such as YouTube to produce a seemingly endless stream of transgressive material. In turn, the media appropriate children’s resistance to adult rationality by offering programs that celebrate inanity like Sponge Bob Square Pants or others like Beavis and Butthead and South Park that constantly transgress rationally held values and beliefs. In this way, children's own culture and popular mass visual culture feed off one another in a common resistance to reason and good sense.

**In Pursuit of Rationality**

The transgressive dimensions of children's culture and popular mass culture stand in marked contrast to schools (Janks, 2002). Schools are still modeled on 19th-century efficiency-driven, assembly-line factories, which, in turn, were modeled on the early 19th-century prison system that curtailed the body by disciplining the mind (Foucault, 1977/1975). Schools appeal to reason as the supreme authority on matters of opinion, belief, and conduct. They stress logical argument, predictable outcomes, sound judgment, and good sense. They are rule-governed, evidence-based, and whenever possible and by whatever means, they suppress their opposite. Irrationality is condemned as childish, for a primary aim of schools is to produce rational beings willing to serve a rationally ordered, adult society.

Such is the pervasiveness of rationality in schools that, despite claims to the contrary, art education has always had more to do with it than the unpredictable and irrational elements of either art or children’s culture. During the heyday of the creative self-expression movement, advocates claimed to offer students genuine freedom to explore and express as they pleased (Viola, 1946; Lowenfeld, 1957), but their classroom practice belied their claims. Prominent proponents of creative self-expression were highly directive; they managed to draw from their students the appearance of spontaneity only by careful manipulation (Wilson, 2007; Smith, 1984). Efland (1976) showed that what he called the “school art style” served the rhetoric of individual freedom while being demonstratively a creature of school culture (p. 37). Early formulations of Discipline-Based Art Education made conformity to the rationality of schooling explicit by advancing the systematic acquisition of well-established fine arts skills and knowledge (Greer, 1984).

Today, under the rubric of Visual Culture, rationality is being pursued by other means. The range of acceptable imagery has been democratized by including popular culture. And the chaotic, endless, and unpredictable nature of popular culture is acknowledged (Wilson, 2005), but it has been rescued for rationality through the strategy of deconstructive analysis. Popular culture is scrutinized for its sexism, racism, its commodity values, and so on—an inherently rational approach (Brown, 2003). Critiquing popular culture is often

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Examples by school-aged children on Facebook include videos and artwork parodies of popular culture such as Hairy Pothead (referring to the Harry Potter novel and film series). There is a group that designs its own South Park characters, and the Pastafarian group, a portmanteau on pasta and Rastafarian, claim to worship The Flying Spaghetti Monster. The latter site includes an image titled Touched by His Noodly Appendage of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel painting of Adam with a Medusa-like deity.
motivated by a concern for moral protection and conceived in terms of logical reasoning and argument arising from evidence; the approach is entirely logos-centric (Janks, 2002). It is as if, in sensing the degree to which popular culture is beyond anyone’s control, art teachers at once felt the need to order it, to tidy it up, by subjecting it to the control of reasoned interpretation. The mindful, purposeful act of deconstruction has become a buttress against popular culture’s oftentimes inane, oftentimes intentionally transgressive nature.

Seemingly to view their primary task as inculcating a critical consciousness, some art teachers have ended up prescribing what is to count as valid knowledge. Some have been so determined to extract politically correct responses from their students that popular culture has been dealt with by carefully curtailing any other possible response (See Herrmann, 2005 for a critique). In one case, students were shown violent imagery and then instructed to produce positive, non-violent imagery. In another case, students were given stencils to follow. So prescriptive were these teachers that the very possibility of transgression was eradicated. Other teachers note student transgression, but lament it, seeing students’ subversive productions as inadequate or inappropriate critique (e.g., Chung, 2006; Tavin & Toczydlowska, 2006; Polaniecki, 2006). Mostly, art teachers ignore student transgression; or at least, they fail to mention it when reporting on their teaching of popular culture (Duncum, 2007). Presumably, they ignore transgression because it is such a normative part of classrooms and the very thing they habitually strive to combat.

Wilson (2003, 2005) acknowledges children’s pleasure in transgression, and he celebrates it; but, he equally sees it as impractical within the classroom. He (2005) argues for what he calls a “transactional pedagogy” whereby students are allowed to display their out-of-classroom drawings within the classroom (p. 19). But, he rightly notes that teachers are commonly reluctant to allow such productions in the classroom where children’s satirical approach to personal relations, romance, desires, and so on “might be viewed as inappropriate” (2003, p. 121). Higgins’ (2007) practice is illustrative. A fifth-grade teacher, Higgins spends his lunchtimes with his students creating a safe, unstructured space where students are encouraged to pursue their own interests in drawing, but he contrasts this with the structure of his formal lessons. Moreover, Wilson (2003) doubts whether popular culture can ever be introduced into the classroom without killing it, without turning fun into mere curriculum plans and motivational strategies.

Transgression in the Classroom

Media educators in the United Kingdom have not been so cautious. Transgressive pleasure and the official, rational culture of the school have not always been viewed as inherently incompatible (e.g., Alvermann, Moon & Hagoed, 1999; Buckingham, 2003; Janks, 2002). Rather, media educators have understood that transgression in the classroom is an inevitable consequence of the repression normally demanded by teachers. They have accepted that a classroom culture founded on rationally will inevitably beget its opposite. Just as popular culture transgresses in response to an overwhelmingly rational society,
and children’s own culture, including their self-initiated drawing, subverts the
general repression of the adult world, so in the classroom children either subvert
rational critiques of popular culture or ignore them. In this way, transgression
in the classroom parallels the transgressive pleasure of popular culture beyond
the classroom.

While sometimes unnerved, media teachers have allowed transgression to
erupt within their classrooms and negotiated the consequences. I believe that
their experience signposts what art teachers need to consider if their current
interest in popular culture is not to be one-sided.

Transgression is highlighted by a practice common in media education of
having students work in teams, where carried away in a spirit of camaraderie,
students produce parodies not only of popular culture genres, but their imme-
diate, shared environment, namely, school life and their teachers. Buckingham
(2003) notes that with parody students can simultaneously acknowledge the
ideological imperatives of their teachers while disavowing any commitment to
them.6 Parody offers a safe space in which flirting with what students know to
be politically incorrect is sanctioned. Parodies of school life allow students the
jousiance of seeing what they can get away with.

Grace and Tobin (1998) provide many examples of such parodies from third
graders. These include short videos of children enjoying “butt jokes”, singing off
key, and performing silly antics. The children constructed visual stories involving
disastrous school field trips with “tyrannical teachers, ridiculous rules and rebel-
lious students” (p. 49). The videos were later watched where “performers and
audience were fused in a surge of camaraderie, a spirit of oneness joined by
laugher” (p. 42). Similarly, Burn and Durrant (2006) observed students video
editing who, while searching for technical competence, laced their dialogue with
social chat and outrageous humor, including the witty dismissal of pretension
among teachers.

Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994) provide examples of parodies from high
school students that mock both their cultural models and school life. Students constantly pushed up against the boundaries of acceptable school
behavior. With Slutmopolitan, for example, which parodied the magazine
Cosmopolitan, a group of girls not only sent up their own gender construction
as weak minded—photo articles included “A step-by-step guide to your frozen
peas dilemma”—but explored their sexuality in ways their teachers found
confronting (p. 201). In describing the project, one of the girls identified a
“tart” as, where “the lipstick is the cheapest thing going, apart from herself that
is…. [Someone] who can’t control her urges, who pastes makeup on, who flirts,
who goes out, drinks, smokes” (pp. 196-197). Setting the tone was a photo-
graph of one of the girls simulating oral sex with a chocolate bar, with text that
read, “30% extra. Only the biggest will do” (p. 198).

In another parody, a group of white girls created a photo story involving, like
their real selves, a group of white girls fantasizing about a group of scantily clad,
black male dancers. In the photo story, the fictitious girls have a group of boys
in their school undress and act out their fantasies, but then reject the boys in

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6Buckingham also
observes that parodies
provide escape from any
possible embarrassment
that students’ work falls
short of the professional
skills of their models.
Passing off their work
as parody avoids any
embarrassment students
have in play acting in a
group, and parody can
act as post-hoc justifi-
cation for whatever they
produce.
favor of their initial fantasies. In the act of producing this story, “the [real] girls created as much subversion as possible” (p. 98). They began by trying to set up an audition to evaluate physical deficiencies among some of the boys in their class which, predictably, set off anxieties among the boys. They then considered developing a narrative around their teacher! Eventually, they decided to use popular, though unruly, boys from another class. By choosing all black boys and posing them as sex objects, the girls managed to transgress the racial divisions within the school, privilege prohibited behavior, and overturn the usual male/female power relationships that dominated their everyday experience of gender. Also, they had the boys fail to fulfill their fantasies, even killing off one who “fancied himself” and who had annoyed them (p. 99). In these various ways the girls played topsy-turvy with normative relationships between black and white, good and bad behavior, male and female, and students and teachers.

Bragg (2000, cited in Buckingham, 2003) describes another parody, this time in the form of a trailer for a horror film involving a serial killer, in which a 16-year-old girl located the killer’s motivation primarily in his gender, age, and ethnicity. The killer was Spanish, was prejudiced against the English, and considered helpless elderly women expendable. Thus, the story involved a heady brew of gratuitous violence, xenophobia, ageism, and misogyny, all of which flew in the face of political correctness.

**Parody and Provocation**

Violating the rationality of schools is clearly problematic for teachers. First, it confronts how they view their role as authority figures. It is unnerving, for example, for a teacher to listen to a group of students enthusiastically describing a film in which “a dumb guy … a total idiot” becomes a teacher (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999, p. 33). Describing themselves as “rapidly aging middle-aged males,” the teachers who oversaw the production of Slutmopolitan confess to being uncomfortable about the explicit exploration of sexuality it involved (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994, p. 199). Equally, the elementary teachers whose third graders produced butt jokes and mean teacher parodies were initially equally uncomfortable (although they came to view their authority as teachers in new ways) (Grace & Tobin, 1998).

Secondly, this work raises serious moral dilemmas. With Slutmopolitan, Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994) were unclear as to whether the girls were satirizing sluts or people who are critical of them, whether it was preferable to be a slut or the well-behaved girls from traditional families they actually were, whether sluts were powerful or not, or even whether the girls thought sluts were real or purely imaginary figures. Yet, Buckingham and Sefton-Green concluded that the exercise provided an opportunity for the girls to explore their sexuality by trying out alternative gender masquerades in ways they would never have been allowed otherwise. Bragg (2000, cited in Buckingham, 2003) too argues that the girl who produced the serial killer movie trailer was able to work through complex emotions and contradictions by allowing her to adopt the identities of both killer and victims. Bragg further argues that this was equally
true of a male student in her class who, she claims, worked through his unacknowledged fantasies of male masochism in a parody of the splatter film genre.

Thus, media educators argue that students’ apparent reproduction of repugnant ideology derived from media models is often a calculated resistance to their classroom culture of political correctness. The views students express are often as much, if not more, a function of the institutional context in which they are uttered than what they truly believe. Consider the following commentary from upper elementary boys about a horror film: “Jason’s better than Freddy. Jason kills more people. One movie he kills like 15 people. The most Freddy ever kills was five, six, total....” (Alvermann, et al., 1999, p. 36). Here, as with the students who told their teacher about a “total idiot” who became a teacher, the valorization of violence may have little to do with views actually held by the student. Perhaps its purpose is simply to shock. And of the third graders mentioned above, Grace and Tobin (1998) comment that the students’ scatological interest and inane antics were not mirror reflections of students’ actual views but were like funhouse mirrors where everything is distorted and exaggerated for comic relief. The parodies allowed students to “represent their desires, work through their fears and concerns and to play with their identity as children” (p. 53). What may appear to be a highly offensive expression of ideas that should be either crushed from the outset, or at best earnestly critiqued, may simply be a matter of students playing with the authority of schools and teachers.

On the other hand, there is no gainsaying the fact that reactionary, abhorrent views are entailed. While parody offers no evidence of students adopting reactionary views, neither does it offer evidence of students developing a politically approved critical consciousness. Parody involves both resistance and reproduction, not only to the form of what it parodies but its ideologies. Ideological resistance and reproduction fold into one another to produce, at best, ideological ambiguity (Sefton-Green & Seop, 2007). It is the very ambiguity of parody that is at once its power and pleasure (Grace & Tobin, 1998). The relationship between reproduction and resistance is often unclear to teachers and, seemingly, to students alike (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994).

**Crossing the Line**

But can students go too far? Is there a line in the sand or does anything go in pursuit of incorporating transgression? Media educators respond with a decided no (e.g., Alvermann, et al., 1999). Buckingham (2003) argues that, where transgressive pleasure is deeply abhorrent, to merely celebrate it is to avoid social responsibility and to acquiesce in the face of consumer hedonism. You cannot, he argues, remain silent when, for example, a group of 14-year-old boys construct a predatory gay character because, as they declared, they hated gays. Grace and Tobin (1998) similarly argue that not all parodies or satires are harmless, and teachers must use their intuitive judgment to make “case-by-case decisions” (p. 60). Grace and Tobin were unsure about videos that lampooned every single group in a school. Everyone was subjected to satire, and while befuddled kindergartners, boring teachers, and school bullies seemed fair game,
the lampooning of the disabled students was unnerving. Was this an unusual form of inclusion or deeply insulting? They were unsure. They were relieved when one child’s interest in animal cruelty was met with disinterest from his peers, and they intervened to stop a video project that seemed to promise to open up rather than narrow racial divisions within the school. They also stopped another parody on religion because it appeared to cross the boundary between religion and the state.

On the one hand, an anything goes policy is socially irresponsible, and on the other hand, attention only to serious critique is unlikely to engage students in the deeply emotional way required for transformation. It is all too easy for critique of popular culture to slip into criticism of its audience, for an analysis of popular culture to be perceived by students as a negation of their pleasures and, by extension, of themselves. Elitism comes in many forms, as much a creature of those who condemn popular culture for its ideologies as those who view it as decadent (Brown, 2003). Thus, Buckingham (2003) calls for “more playful forms of pedagogy that engage directly with young people’s emotional investments in the media and with their sense of agency” (p. 5). Others call for a “post-critical pedagogy” (Green, 1998, p. 177) that goes “beyond reason” (Janks, 2002, p. 7), “beyond radical pedagogy” (Richards, 1998, p. 132) to involve humor and students’ affective investments. We can expose the faulty logic of popular culture, identify its telling absences, examine its underpinning values, and expose its assumptions, and as Janks (2002) says, “When we have finished, students can produce a reasoned critique that is not in any way transformative” (p. 9). Students learn the rules of deconstructive critique, but deconstruction is no match for the seductive powers of popular culture. Popular culture offers sites of desire and identification and “where identification promises the fulfillment of desire, reason cannot compete” (p. 10).

The difficulty of being taken seriously by students is compounded by mass media that frequently caricature teachers as dull and overly earnest, as “incompetent nincompoops or rigid authoritarians” (Kenway & Bullen, 2001, p. 73), and media educators argue that teachers of popular culture frequently do themselves no good by in any way conforming to these stereotypes (Buckingham, 2003; Green, 1998; Richards, 1998). Finding themselves the butt of humor and schooling as represented as irrelevant to students’ lives, it is easy for teachers to respond by denigrating the media, seeing it as the enemy, but this, in turn, only further alienates students from school (Kenway & Bullen, 2001). When media culture has become a site for subverting authority, seriousness, and conformity, and students see attempts to impose authority over their affective investments in popular culture—be it moral, cultural, or political—teachers are unlikely to be taken seriously. From the outset, attempts at cultural inoculation are alike with attempts to have students condemn what they enjoy (Buckingham, et al., 2005), and students need to be “given permission to be other than sensible and serious” (Comber in Janks, 2002, p. 9).

This does not mean that transgression becomes something taught, something that is timetabled straight after lunch on a Wednesday, or that it needs its own state-sanctioned standard. It means that transgression should be allowed
to erupt when it will and play its disruptive role. Neither does this mean abandoning the pursuit of a critical consciousness among students; it means that without an acknowledgment of students’ pleasure-taking, developing a critical attitude is virtually impossible. Richard (2007) appropriately writes of a pedagogy for popular culture that engages “playful yet critical practices of the transforming self” (p. 24). What makes a difference is providing students with a recognition that they, not their teachers alone, possess the power to think, feel, and act according to their own volition. Thus Alvermann, et. al. (1999) argue that teachers need to act as guides, pushing students along when they get stuck and needing to speak out when they feel they can make a positive difference by adding their voice “to the mix” (p. 129).

Conclusion

Introducing the pleasures of popular culture, including its frequently transgressive nature, is to teach not only about popular culture but through it. Unless teaching students to critique popular culture is undertaken by acknowledging its pleasures, critiques will remain on only one side of the ledger, dealing with ideology but ignoring fun. Art educators have long recognized that to teach fine art in a way that has the measure of its complexity and depth means not only to teach about it but through it. It follows that if we are to teach popular culture, it must be taught in a similar way, for popular culture is no less complex than fine art. Only thus will the learning be deeply felt; only then will understanding reach the intangible, ineffable level we have sought to teach fine art. To achieve this, we must be willing to go beyond an entirely rationalistic approach, to leaven critique with a playful pedagogy. This means acknowledging that outcomes cannot be carefully prescribed. It means being willing to be unnerved by students who challenge traditional sources of authority, including one’s own, and accepting that moral ambiguity is unavoidable. This said, it is also to adopt pedagogy commensurate with the complex, paradoxical nature of popular culture, which is simultaneously conformist and transgressive, both an organ of social cohesion—including social inequalities—and a vehicle for sheer hedonism. Only by moving away from rational critique is it possible also to engage with it. Only a playful pedagogy promises the possibility of success.

References


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