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Source: *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, Vol. 29, No. 1, The Popular Media, Education, and Resistance/ Les mass-média populaires, l'éducation et la résistance (2006), pp. 154-175

Published by: [Canadian Society for the Study of Education](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20054151>

Accessed: 01/03/2011 13:39

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# Independent Media, Youth Agency, and the Promise of Media Education

*Stuart R. Poyntz*

Through a discussion of two videos – *The Take* (Naomi Klein & Avi Lewis, 2004), and a student project – I argue that media education can further the role of youth as critically engaged, democratic citizens most effectively when educators develop students' capacity for reflection and self-expression through engagement with those power structures that limit such acts. Media literacy's democratic promise thus evolves from the productive tensions that arise from educators' desire to protect and prepare students to live in a media saturated society. Of late, media education has strayed from this objective. I suggest that this move is not necessary.

Key words: media production, democracy, critical practice, pedagogy

À partir de l'analyse de deux vidéos – *The Take* (Naomi Klein et Avi Lewis, 2004) et d'un projet d'élèves –, l'auteur fait valoir que l'initiation aux médias peut aider les jeunes à mieux jouer un rôle de citoyens éclairés dans un contexte démocratique si les enseignants développent chez leurs élèves une capacité de réflexion et d'expression de soi en les invitant à s'investir dans les structures du pouvoir qui canalisent cette capacité. La promesse démocratique qui sous-tend l'initiation aux médias surgit ainsi à partir des tensions productives dérivant du désir des enseignants de protéger les élèves et de les préparer à vivre dans une société où les médias sont omniprésents. Ces derniers temps, l'initiation aux médias a dévié de cet objectif. L'auteur soutient qu'il ne doit pas en être nécessairement ainsi.

Mots clés : production, démocratie, travail de critique, pédagogie

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The promise of classroom-based media education develops as critical media practices change throughout society. Educators often struggle to incorporate these practices into their work; but their existence and the possibility of drawing connections between them and young people define the real potential for a democratically oriented, critical media pedagogy. To unpack this argument, I have used a recent Canadian documentary.

*The Take* (2004), the first film from the writer/broadcaster/activist pair, Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis, offers a sense of hopeful possibility for democratic change in an otherwise cynical, paranoid, and complex media landscape. Early on in the documentary, a bird's-eye view shot pans across Buenos Aires at night. Naomi Klein narrates: "Seen from above, Buenos Aires still looks like Europe or North America; blinking logos entice you to buy, commanding bank towers urge you to save." And yet life on the streets below is very different indeed. In fact, for a time, Argentina's banks didn't entice people to save because "the banks [were] encased in protective steel and tattooed with graffiti" that read: THIEVES. Closed after Argentina defaulted on its international debt, bank failures were only the beginning of a system-wide, political-economic collapse that came to a head in December 2001.

What resulted from this crisis wasn't just another poor country, but, as the narration continues, "a rich country made poor." Undone by a remarkable failure in the International Monetary Fund's neo-liberal development policies, Argentina's catastrophe has waned, but not before extraordinary new developments have taken shape. From a system in ruins, where 50 per cent of the people fell below the poverty line, a new optimism and sense of promise has arisen. Driven in part by the National Movement of Recovered Factories, a network of worker cooperative organizations, the success of this body is at the centre of a story mindful of possibilities for social, political, and economic change, even when faced with dire and overwhelming obstacles.

In relation to recent debates in media education, the importance of *The Take* derives from the lesson it offers about the potential of critical media pedagogy. Since the onset of "the second phase of media literacy" (Bazalgette, 1997, p. 72) in the early 1990s, there has been a tendency to see practices in the field in terms of a dichotomy between models of *protectionism* and of *preparation* (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 1998; von Feilitzen, 2000, 2004). Among other elements, these models are distinguished by the way they envision media literacy's potential as a democratic discourse, and the relationship of this potential to pedagogy and young people's own media production work. Of late, the less ambitious and more modest goals of preparation models have held sway, yet I think films like *The Take* force us to question these

developments. It is an independent media production that engages young people while offering a sustained critique of globalization. As such, it demonstrates what a more radical vision can look like and why such a vision points to the real promise of media literacy.

Currently, this promise is in doubt, not least because the relationship between protectionism and models of preparation are hamstrung by the troubled history of inoculation within media education. Early writings in the field – as exemplified by the work of F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson (1933; republished in 1960) in the UK, or the early work of Marshall McLuhan (1951) in Canada – rejected the mainstream media and argued that young people should be protected from pop culture’s pernicious effects. Today, the defensiveness in this position resonates with practices in certain American media literacy circles (Kubey, 2003). If this is less true in the rest of the Western world – in the UK, Australia, Canada, and the Scandinavian countries, young people’s engagements with pop culture are thought to be the starting point for media education (Buckingham & Domaille, 2004; Kubey, 2003; von Feilitzen, 2000) – the legacy of inoculation continues to haunt certain media education objectives.

This legacy casts a spell, for instance, over classroom practices that critically address how the popular media reproduce inequitable, hegemonic forms of power. Although such work is successful only when part of a “lively, democratic, ... action-oriented” pedagogy, the value of these practices is called into doubt because it is thought they mask a paternalism that seeks to protect youth (Masterman, 1985, p. 27). The spectre of inoculation thus surfaces and casts a shadow of uncertainty around how educators engage young people in “analyzing media culture as products of social production and struggle” (Kellner, 1998, p. 113). Some (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 1998) argue that the only way to overcome this problem and respect young people’s engagements with the media is by ensuring teachers focus on preparing students to operate in a media saturated world. Educators are not to play a leadership role in alerting children and youth to the risks citizens face in media culture, nor should educators focus on developing young people as critical, sophisticated, and active citizens. Rather, their intentions should be to develop young people’s competencies with the media they already use.

But pursuing this direction means the second phase of media literacy has forsaken an orientation toward the kind of radical democratic projects that try to imagine, if not easily achieve, more autonomous conditions and equitable ways of life.

Such developments weaken media education and so in response I want to draw from *The Take* to explore two productive tensions in the relationship between protectionism and preparation. In considering the democratic potential of media education in this way, I draw on writers like Carmen Luke (2002), Douglas Kellner (1998, 2002), Justin Lewis, and Sut Jhally (1998). They also envision media education as a project of social justice that addresses how the media situate and define students' options for democratic change. Len Masterman and David Buckingham are crucial foils in this discussion because Masterman has recently been associated with protectionist tendencies in the field. He continues to argue for a media pedagogy that draws on the traditions of critical theory and because of this, his work (1983, 1985, 1993, 1997) has been distinguished from Buckingham's preparation-oriented project, a project media educators might situate as a form of liberal education<sup>1</sup>. Divisions between these scholars can be used fruitfully to suggest promise and possibility within media literacy. Central to my purpose is exploring two areas of tension that indicate what this promise might be.

The first tension has to do with the role of deconstruction in media literacy. In isolation from other critical strategies, deconstruction is less effective today as a tool for identifying and contesting the work of economic and ideological forces in the media (Buckingham, 2003; Luke, 2002). If the effectiveness of deconstruction has waned, however, this should not discourage media educators from searching out additional helpful strategies to reveal counter-hegemonic forms of media agency. This is what *The Take* offers. It includes a critique of how power is exercised in an age of globalization and showcases a hopeful and successful challenge to that power. The film is not naïve about the difficulties of social, political, or economic change, but, importantly, it documents possibilities for such change in a way that speaks to young people. Thereby, *The Take* points toward the kind of radical democratic ambitions I believe represent the outside limits and promise of critical media literacy.

The second tension I work through surfaces when I address critical moments in student production work. Here, I turn from *The Take* to draw lessons from younger media producers and a video I was involved with while working at Pacific Cinémathèque, a film institute in Vancouver. Produced at an inner-city high school, the video suggests how youth develop important forms of self-expression through digital media production. It also highlights how such self-expressions often involve social and political power formations. When educators address the presence of such formations in students' work, Buckingham (2003) cautions, they risk censoring student work by "subjecting [it] to ... 'critical analysis'" (p. 171). I argue, however, that ignoring such analysis significantly limits the potential for democratic leadership among both educators and critically engaged young people who see their peers' work. As a result, opportunities for furthering a sense of agency and reflexivity among youth are missed.

The critical value of competency building with students must always be conceived in relation to those social, political, or cultural power structures that limit how these competencies take shape. This means the limits of media education are neither located solely in attempts to prepare young people to operate in a media saturated culture, nor in attempts to protect them from this culture. Rather, the promise of media education is realized as young people's capacities for reflection and self-expression are enabled through engagement with the power structures that limit such acts (Goldfarb, 2002; Luke, 2002). Only then can students and educators envision the kind of media representations that will be part of a more autonomous and equitable future.

#### PROTECTION/PREPARATION

Critics have been known to characterize protectionism as the pedagogical equivalent of a "tetanus shot" (Bazalgette, 1997, p. 72). In its worst incarnations, this refers to that old inoculationist impulse; but protectionism has also meant teaching young people to deconstruct media texts so they aren't "taken in by fantasy, seduced by ... violence, or manipulated by commercial ploys" (Bazalgette, 1997, p. 72). Conceived in this way, media is seen to pose risks to young people, especially in relation to "problem areas like ... materialism, nutrition and

body images, ... distortion and bias in reporting, and racial, class, gender, or sexual identity stereotyping" (Hobbs 1998, p. 19). Masterman's seminal work, *Teaching the Media* (1985), has ironically come to represent the last wave of a protectionist fold. In this work, Masterman challenges simplistic efforts to protect or inoculate young people against the media, and yet Buckingham (2003) argues that here and in subsequent work Masterman (1993, 1997) produces just the kind of protectionist, rational, semiotics-informed analysis that alienates educators and students. Moreover, Buckingham (1992, 1998, 2003) tells educators, because this work does not account for the contradictory ways media representations operate today, it largely underestimates how viewers invest legitimate forms of pleasure in mainstream texts. These shortcomings are also part of a much larger problem: Masterman and the protectionist camp do not take seriously the need to address how young people learn, or if this is done, protectionists are accused of relying on a top-down, teacher-to-student model that posits the right way for children and young people to understand media representations (Buckingham, 2003, pp. 108-09). Models of preparation thus come to be seen as a means of overcoming the weaknesses of an older, more naïve version of media education. With this move, however, the nature and intentions of critical practice in the field are also reconfigured, in less radical terms.

Preparation models in fact develop as a critical literacy for a postmodern age. They teach young people to develop playful, competent relationships with the media, but always in ways limited by what young people discover on their own terms. Youth are asked to analyze, evaluate, and reflect on the mainstream media, but because student-centred interests drive the analysis, any concerns educators might have about the risks posed by pop culture become less relevant. The goal, then, is to develop critical thinking – "the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality" – but without a critical activism informed by alternative media practices developing either inside or on the margins of mainstream culture (von Feilitzen, 2000, p. 24). Media education thus becomes a competency building project, one that equips children and youth with skills in using and evaluating media but not an understanding of why it is necessary to change media. As a result,

preparation models abandon the idea that classroom media education practices develop best when these models are attentive to a tension between the goals of competency building and the impact of counter-hegemonic media work being produced in the culture at large (Lewis & Jhally, 1998). When this happens, however, the impact of media education as a set of discourses that fully mobilize young people's "critical capacities" is lessened (Fraser, 1997, p. 214). Do media educators need to follow this direction? I think not, and it is helpful to use Masterman and Buckingham as foils for exploring what the limits and promise of media pedagogy might be. Two important areas where educators can unpack tensions that inform this question have to do with the way deconstruction relates to critical acts in media education and with the way they conceive critical moments in student production work.

#### DECONSTRUCTION AND NEW CRITICAL ACTS

The role of deconstruction in relation to the critical potential in media education can be helpfully located through Masterman's work (1983, 1985, 1997). His project has long taken shape through a constructive engagement with structuralist semiotics and the tradition of 1970s and 80s British cultural studies. Central to this approach, he considers mainstream media a hegemonic apparatus that organizes and produces power in Western culture. Seen from this perspective, the media are narrative machines that construct reality by naturalizing various codes that produce a series of ideological effects. Such effects sustain values (which many often consensually agree to) that largely represent the interests of dominant classes and power formations in society (Masterman, 1993). Importantly, Masterman has always argued that if these values represent the preferred meanings in texts, their impact is dependent on the work of audiences to make sense of movies, TV shows, video games, and so forth. He suggests, in other words, that there is always room for audiences to decode and initiate their own alternative or oppositional readings of media representations (Masterman, 1985; Hall, 1980).

Critical practice in this tradition in fact encourages precisely this sort of work by audiences. By decoding and initiating alternative and



oppositional interpretations of media, audiences reverse “the process through which a medium selects and edits material into a polished, continuous and seamless flow” (Masterman, 1983, p. 10). By this, powerful forms of “semiological guerilla warfare” (Derry, 1993) can develop, as exemplified by the work of *Adbusters* and documented in Jill Sharpe’s 2001 movie, *Culture Jam: Hijacking Commercial Culture*. Here, creative and critical media practice is expressed through conscious, ironic, and strategic work with the media’s own modes of representation. Deconstruction thus breaks through textual surfaces “to reveal the techniques through which meanings are produced,” with the result that critical terms are generated for viewing various forms of moving images (Masterman, 1983, p. 10). This, in turn, helps to feed “a more totally liberating curriculum for schools” because young people are enabled to engage with issues of social justice and critical citizenship through struggles over how dominant kinds of information and practices of representation become part of their lives (Masterman, 1983, p. 10).

Now, as Buckingham (2000a, 2003) has pointed out, where there are significant difficulties with this critical strategy, they have to do with changes in the way texts operate. Deconstruction privileges two critical moments in analyzing media texts. First, if children and youth are enabled to understand how visual codes like lighting, camera angles, or character types naturalize meaning, the suggestion is they are less likely to be swayed by messages in texts. Once this happens, a second critical moment opens itself up as young people extend their new found ability to analyze how media construct meaning by employing a set of oppositional production techniques – such as montage editing or elliptical forms of storytelling – to challenge power-laden media representations. The difficulty with this trajectory, however, is it works best when each medium operates primarily with its own language of representation and when these languages are deployed without irony. But neither of these characteristics is true of contemporary media.

Many TV shows, advertisements, movies, and computer games targeted at children and youth, for instance, are no longer produced as discrete products with specific media languages (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003) today. Rather, as Marsha Kinder (1991) argues, they are created as marketing platforms based on a model of ‘trans-media

intertextuality.’ Profit certainly drives this process because the more value media conglomerates can yoke out of their brands – through brand extensions across different media products, for example – the better. The point, then, is texts are no longer characteristically discrete. Instead, they include an easy intertextuality and often visible markings (e.g., a self-conscious irony) of the media languages used in their production (Buckingham, 2000a, pp. 88-92; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003; Luke, 2002). As but two examples, most young people are far more likely today to see the disruption of a seamless and continuous flow in media languages in terms of the irony in Wes Craven’s *Scream* (1996, 1997, 2000) franchise or TV programs like *That 70s Show*. And because neither of these programs, or their like, has much to do with producing a critical consciousness, it is more difficult today to understand how revealing the techniques through which meaning is produced in media actually supports young people’s ability to critically engage with their lives. This situation is complicated further because clear distinctions between dominant and oppositional media languages are disappearing in mainstream pop culture as advertising and mainstream music videos (as but two examples) become more visually complex. The incorporation of independent film production companies as niche studios within larger media conglomerates adds another layer of complexity to these developments. “The notion that there are fixed professional ‘norms’ that should be contested and deconstructed, [in other words,] has become highly questionable” (Buckingham, 2000a, p. 222). The upshot of this development is that deconstructive critiques that play one media language off against another or that posit an inherently oppositional language against the mainstream do not affect audiences in quite the same way educators imagined two decades ago.

These shifts in mainstream culture in fact highlight the historicization of deconstruction as a mode of critical practice.<sup>2</sup> They also suggest the complexity in the representational language young people encounter today. As a result, if deconstruction remains a valuable technique for media educators, it can no longer be the dominant critical lens for engaging with the media system. This is a problem for Masterman and for those concerned with the risks posed by the media. The question educators need to ask, however, is: does this mean the

critique of central power formations within mainstream media culture is no longer effective? Such work is a touchstone in an activist, democratically oriented, media education project. In response to this question, then, I want to argue the answer here must be no.

Deconstruction has long aimed to identify the boundaries and limits within which meaning is produced in society. It develops counter narratives that map inequitable forms of power (often having to do with issues of race, class, gender, or sexuality) as practices of hope. Deconstruction thus attempts to suggest a sense of the possible that promises a time – yet-to-come – when inequities and injustices will no longer exist. No one today wants to be cast as naïve about opportunities for achieving such objectives. Yet to hold forth to these dreams, without falling prey to a Pollyanna-ish view of the future, is possible if educators can locate examples of such transformative acts in the culture at large. Here, then, is where I shall return to *The Take* because it is just this kind of lesson the film offers, not only because of the story it tells about meaningful systemic change taking place in Argentina, but, just as importantly, because of the way this story is told.

At the centre of *The Take* is the recovered factories movement, a loosely networked association that has sustained more than 200 factories and 15,000 jobs set to disappear in Argentina's post-2001 nightmare. Driving the movement's development are workers who refused to accept "the corroding machinery of ... empty factories and the deteriorating health of their children" (Magnani, 2003 para. 6). Against such a future, workers formed legally recognized co-ops and used expropriation measures, granted by the national government, and other financial tools, including leveraging salaries owed to them to buy out former companies, to take control of their workplaces and communities. Not all these efforts went uncontested, but *The Take* makes clear that the recovered factories network has spawned real success and promise for those thrown into chaos by a policy regime drunk on the illusions of unregulated globalization.

At the same time, I note that *The Take* is not naïve about the possibilities for structural, systematic change in complex personal, historical, and political-economic situations. Directors Klein and Lewis clearly choose to portray the contradictions such change brings about.

For instance, they seem to ask: does the cooperative structure of the recovered factories movement really amount to a step beyond a market-based model of economic development, or, is this simply a more humane, community-friendly form of capitalism? They also draw particular attention to families and the ways historical transformation gets caught up in the allegiances of some to past political formations (for instance, the optimism and nostalgia embodied in Argentina's Peronist history), while providing others (such as Matté, the new Zanon Ceramics factory worker in the video) with novel conceptions of a political future. This is to say that critical acts are never simple or uncontested. But they can be and, in the case of Argentina, are possible. By the end of *The Take*, viewers are left wondering whether a cooperative movement largely organized around industrial factories (but not only – it also involves formerly privately run schools and health clinics) has the economic staying power to survive in an age of “flexible production” (Harvey, 1989). Whether it does or not, the film gives reason to believe that the movement's counter-hegemonic network includes the kind of flexible organization that gives cause for hope.

Just as importantly for my purposes, this story is also not just a sign of protest, an ironic culture jam against globalization. It is instead a story about what is being done to reconfigure the socio-economic order of globalization to ensure this order serves people, rather than just profits. In telling this story, the film is playful (e.g., an election ad announcing the return of former president, Carlos Menem, who presided over the country's economic collapse, is especially sharp), driven by a narrative and historical conflict (in particular, the election battle between the President, Nestor Kirshner, and Menem), and anchored around compelling, genuinely emotional characters (e.g., the soft spoken Freddy and his young family). It includes a sound-scape that is metaphorically interesting without being emotionally pandering, and visually, the camera is used to highlight the devastation of closed factories, while also providing striking images that offer levity in an otherwise serious story.

For all these reasons, I suggest this is a film that young people can engage with. This is the hope of the filmmakers and the film's distributor (Canada's National Film Board), and after spending a decade working as a media educator, I believe it can succeed (personal communication, Al

Parsons, December 15, 2004). *The Take* is not protective in a paternalistic way, but it does highlight the risks and dangers unregulated policies and practices of globalization pose for families, communities, and nations. It offers a sense of romanticism about the possibilities for social, political, and economic change, but it also speaks with a note of skepticism about the difficulties in bringing about such change. In this way, it represents a resource for a more totally liberating media education curriculum; not a curriculum beholden to a modernist and now unrealistic view of revolutionary change, but one that envisions democratic activism as part of the work of media educators. Such a curriculum is likely to alienate some students because it challenges how many of them engage with the media. Yet, as a set of counter narratives, media education really only begins a meaningful collaborative learning process by disorienting students' typical media engagements. Succeeding in this work requires that media educators pay heed to what Masterman (1985) long ago noted is "[t]he acid test of any media education program: [it must ensure students] are critical in their own use and understanding of the media when the teacher is not there" (pp. 24-25). Working toward such goals, however, need not constrain educators' desire to map how domination operates through media representations, nor their need to find media practices intent on furthering new democratic possibilities. It just means doing this work in a way that ensures young people are part of and sometimes leaders in the project.

#### ENCOUNTERING DOMINANT POWER FORMATIONS THROUGH PRODUCTION

On this final point, there is a powerful slogan in *The Take* – OCCUPY, RESIST, PRODUCE – that refers to the way worker cooperatives have taken charge of dilapidated factories in Argentina in the post-2001 era. In a sense, Klein and Lewis's film is an example of this strategy. The directors themselves were broadcasters – in Lewis's case on CBC Newsworld's *CounterSpin* – and media critics – most famously in Klein's book, *No Logo* (2000) – before traveling to Argentina to produce a film about the possibilities for social, political, and economic change. Where I have used *The Take* thus far to locate a productive tension that is part of media literacy's critical potential, it is fitting that I extend this discussion

a step further by unpacking a related tension in student production work. Such work is where young people most clearly express their active agency, so if educators are to imagine media education's potential, understanding how critical moments surface in student-made media is central to the promise and possibilities of the field.

Importantly, questions on this are central to divisions between protectionism and models of preparation. Those concerned with the risks the mainstream media poses to young people, for instance, are often thought to see student-made media as merely imitative of an industrial Hollywood form. Buckingham (2000b) has accused Masterman of this,<sup>3</sup> and yet if Masterman notes the way early production work can reproduce the pop cultural forms children and young people regularly see, he has always measured these concerns against a larger conception of the way student-made media enables youthful voices and confidence to flourish.<sup>4</sup> More recently, Carmen Luke (2002) has articulated a similar view, the gist of which is that student productions must always be conceived in relation to dominant practices of media representation.

Developing competencies with new media forms promotes self-expression while preparing young people to operate in the current media environment (Buckingham 2003; von Feilitzen, 2000, 2004). It empowers and strengthens youth to use and listen to each other's voices, and it also encourages educators to turn to students when producing media about risk behaviours for young people<sup>5</sup> (Buckingham & Harvey, 2001; Buckingham, Niesyto & Fisherkeller, 2003; Goldfarb, 2002). Through these developments student production work fuels a bond between youth and their communities by allowing them to investigate and engage more fully with the lives of those who matter to them. Importantly, when this happens, however, it becomes clear that the critical potential in student videos surfaces inside a tension between the value of this work as self-expression and its meaning in relation to dominant social and political formations. This is so because when anyone represents and articulates visions about his or her community, this process necessarily brings them into relationships with power dynamics that organize and limit those communities. To conclude I want to highlight this point in relation to student-made media by discussing a video produced by a group of high school students I worked with while

Education Director at Pacific Cinémathèque.

#### YOUTH MEDIA PRODUCTION

*Meg's Father* is a short, ten-minute project that testifies to the impact video production can generate as a form of self-expression for the video maker, her production colleagues, and youth audiences. It also demonstrates how projects seemingly about self-expression bring young people into relationships with power formations that students need to theorize and understand. In these instances, two analytical moments – one about the development of competencies in telling stories, and a second about the relation of these stories to hegemonic formations – come together. When this happens productive opportunities surface that allow media educators to orient young people toward the larger democratic possibilities within critical media literacy. Aiming toward these objectives defines what I see as the purpose of media education.

*Meg's Father* began as the student producer/narrator sat in her English class. As the narration explains, the teacher asked the students to write a story from what at first sight appears a “seemingly unremarkable image or scene.” To make the idea clear, by sheer coincidence, the teacher told the story of a man known to the producer/narrator. The teacher had observed this figure on occasion “riding or pushing a bike on Vancouver’s cannery row,” near the railway tracks in the north east side of town. The area is part of what’s known as “Canada’s poorest postal code.” As the narrator reveals, the man removed himself from the mainstream of society as a protest against the overwhelming materialism of day-to-day life. He lives in a self-built shelter in the bush surrounding the waterfront and has so for three years. This man is also the video maker’s father. What the rest of the story manages to capture is the unique closeness and inevitable divide that characterizes their relationship. It does this with a remarkable degree of strength and openness, which in part explains why the video has been screened before hundreds of people since 2002.

To be clear, during these screenings, it is not the father’s arguments against materialism and consumer culture that succeed. The video instead strikes a chord with audiences because it reveals certain boundaries in society. These boundaries become visible when the

daughter's mainstream life and her father's alternative life are shown to be both intimately connected and unavoidably separate. In the video, the father's world has contiguity with a more ordinary life, it remains alongside that life, but it is also forever outside that life. Given this, it is probably no surprise that when young people watch *Meg's Father*, they are often left silent. They are not bored or uninterested; rather, they talk about being confused (personal communication, Patti Fraser, December 15, 2004). They are uncertain about how to react to a man many teenagers usually ignore or disparage. *Meg's Father* makes this difficult to do, and because of this, I think what audiences experience in their responses is the difficulty young people encounter when asked to confront dominant social and political power formations. Such a confrontation was not the intention of the filmmaker; she simply wanted to tell a story about her family. In doing so, however, she addressed and employed power relations that mark boundaries in society, boundaries having to do with hegemonic and counter-hegemonic notions of subjectivity, agency, and difference.

On the one hand, *Meg's Father* engages with these notions by challenging and refusing the ways our culture pathologizes those who reject a mainstream, middle-class life. The video does not propose young people or adults emulate this life, but it refuses to slight or dismiss those who do. The story, instead, traces the divisions that are irrevocably a part of how two lives are tied together. These divisions are manageable for father and daughter, and because of this, the video confuses young audiences who are so used to seeing marginal people as pathologically weak, pitiful, or irrelevant. Society often represents those who reject or are unable to participate in a middle-class life of bourgeois accumulation as failures. Here, the father is not a failure. Instead, he is an active subject of tremendous intelligence and endurance, one who lives in touch with his daughter's life, just not inside that life. In this way, *Meg's Father* challenges how audiences engage with people who live without material abundance. Society rarely recognizes and respects such non-conforming, alternative experiences, and because *Meg's Father* does, it transgresses the boundaries of what subjectivity and agency are understood to mean in our society.

When young audiences respond with degrees of confusion to the



video, it is essential that educators use this uncertainty to frame critically how *Meg's Father* contests dominant conceptions of a full and vital life. In doing this they productively work that tension I spoke of earlier between student self-expression and the relationship of this expression to hegemonic forms of power. Thereby, they expand young people's agency. One way to do this is by using videos like *Meg's Father* to challenge how youth create meaningful and memorable characters in their productions. When used in this way, young audiences begin to consider how the father and the father/daughter relationship defy stereotypes. Asking students to explain what is unique about these two people, why they stand out in their minds, and how this relates to the way social "outcasts" are understood, gives young people a way to unpack the confusion they feel after watching the video (personal communication, Patti Fraser, December 15, 2004). Students' responses to these questions can then feed into how young people generate new characters in their own work. Of course not all these future videos will follow the challenging path exemplified by *Meg's Father*; but the more young people watch original work by their peers, the more they aim toward similar kinds of creative expression. As students reconsider their own uncertain responses to the people in *Meg's Father*, in other words, they reflect on and begin to see how social stereotypes structure their understanding of what it means to live a meaningful life. By this, one peer-produced documentary acts as a catalyst that can expand how young people understand possibilities for their own and other's agency and engagement with the world.

To be sure, *Meg's Father* also inadvertently reproduces an exclusion that reinforces power relations currently alive in society. It does this by foregrounding the power of individual agency while omitting the social frameworks through which that agency is made possible. This is a problem in a hyper-capitalist, consumer-driven culture where individualism is privileged as the locus of action to the exclusion of the network of social relationships that make any sort of agency possible. Educators know that the actions of young people never exist in a social vacuum, and yet, unintentionally, this is precisely the notion present in *Meg's Father*. Although the video traces the remarkable relationship between a daughter and her father, educators will recognize that the

daughter's experience depends on the support of other social networks – including family members, teachers, community members and institutions, and friends – that are part of her life. Evidence of these networks is not obviously apparent on screen. Instead, these networks are an absence in the story, an absence that nonetheless remains evident in the markings of happiness visible in the lives of those the audience sees. This takes nothing away from the video maker's clear vitality and ability; yet such strength and competence are surely conceivable only in combination with a resourceful and dynamic community of support. Such a community is crucial to the video maker's experience; by excluding this element, the video inadvertently focuses the viewer's attention on individual agency – that of the daughter and her father – to the exclusion of the social networks essential for feeding the agency that exists in any young person's life. By this, the video reinforces an ideological bias in society, a bias that excludes recognition of the larger social and political frameworks that make all lives possible.

An effective way to move young people toward this analysis is by having them imagine the back-story of the people we meet in *Meg's Father*. The back-story is a character's history prior to the point where audiences meet him or her in a film. By having students write or role-play this history in relation to *Meg's Father*, media educators encourage students to understand the larger social networks central to "Meg's" life. Patti Fraser (former Script Supervisor, Pacific Cinémathèque) and I have had students produce such back-stories when using the video as a tool to teach script development. This is an especially useful context because when young people do this work in preparation for writing and producing their own videos, they often (but not always) approach their documentary subjects with a different degree of attention and respect. Youth are better able to map the resources and people lying behind the lives they will eventually present on screen. They consider the kinds of support structures a young person might need to be a courageous and active agent in the world. Most importantly, they become aware that such agency rarely happens of its own accord; rather, it is facilitated through the community of support teenagers draw on to become confident, vital actors. Through a non-patronizing process, in other words, young people come to recognize what and who is excluded from

the story; by this, media educators are able to locate the social networks everyone relies on to be effective and in control of their lives.

These examples from *Meg's Father* exemplify how the critical possibilities of young people's work exists at the point of a productive tension; a tension between self-expression and the way this self-expression brings young people into relationships with dominant social and political formations. It is not enough, in other words, to suggest that the critical moment in youth produced work is registered in the ways these productions allow new, young voices to flourish. This is of course vital; but if media educators are to take full advantage of the opportunities this work affords for developing young people as critical, sophisticated and active citizens, it is also crucial that students learn to identify how their productions inadvertently challenge and engage with power. By doing this, media educators work with the tensions in youth media as part of a pedagogy of hope. Such a pedagogy is not naïve; rather it locates the promise of classroom-based media education in the critical voices and practices alive throughout society.

Dominant and formative media practices limit what is possible in society. These practices are certainly more complex than in the past, and so if teaching young people how to deconstruct media remains important, educators know this is insufficient as a critical media literacy strategy. In part, the institution of the protection/preparation divide is driven by these developments. I argue, however, that both *The Take* and *Meg's Father* are but two examples suggestive of how the democratic potential of critical media education can still develop by working the productive tensions arising when educators protect and prepare students. When this happens, a much more compelling and effective understanding of critical practice inserts itself into the field. And so it becomes possible again to envision how media pedagogy addresses society's promise of democratic citizenship and change.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Deirdre Kelly and Michelle Stack for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. I also want to acknowledge two educators – Jim Crescenzo and Corin Browne – whose work with young people continues to inform my own understanding of what the promise of media education can be.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Buckingham is of course hesitant about abandoning "the 'modernist' project of cultural criticism" and yet he remains equally cautious about theorizing the place of normative claims in the work media educators do with young people (Buckingham, 2003, p. 171). Because of this, I suggest his project fits within a tradition of liberal education that also draws widely on the influences of postmodernism.

<sup>2</sup> In the field of visual culture, others (Rogoff, 1998) have addressed this problem from a different perspective, suggesting that our "field of vision" now increasingly replicates an experience alike what Derrida described through his notion of *différance*. "Derrida's conceptualization of *différance* takes the form of a critique of the binary logic in which every element of meaning constitution is locked into signification in relation to the other..." (p. 25). But today the visual life of the mainstream media articulates "the continuous displacement of meaning in the field of vision and the visible" (p. 25). Which is to say, we no longer see media as distinct languages or forms and so, in this sense, the media operationalizes the logic within Derrida's critical methodology.

<sup>3</sup> Buckingham (2000b) suggests, for instance, that Masterman understands student production work as imitative and imitation is "seen to be an inherently unthinking process ... through which the 'dominant ideologies' of media products [are] simply internalized and reproduced. An emphasis on student production [is] therefore seen to be at odds with the radical political mission of media education, and its struggle against the ideological hegemony of capitalism" (p. 221).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, more than two decades ago Masterman (1983) argued his notion of critical reading "needs to be complemented by practical video work, the production of media materials for students themselves, and by the use of simulations through which a range of alternative codings can be explored" (pp. 11-12).

<sup>5</sup> Many organizations are involved in this work in both Canada and the US, but, in particular, see the work of Pacific Cinémathèque's Education Department ([www.cinematheque.bc.ca/education](http://www.cinematheque.bc.ca/education)) and the Access to Media Education Society ([www.accesstomedia.org](http://www.accesstomedia.org)), both located in Vancouver.

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