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BY MYRNA A. HANT



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SEVERAL YEARS AGO I decided to leave an administrative position at Chapman University and to pursue new goals. Soon after I left Chapman, I audited Dr. Rhonda Hammer's "Critical Media Literacy" course, an experience that enriched all aspects of my new work life. My return to scholarly studies was provoked, in part, by my interests in the intersectional relations of research, teaching, and community activism. In each of these areas I became aware of the empowering dimensions of critical media literacy perspectives. This course, and another like it,¹ enabled me to better apply theoretical and pragmatic approaches to both my research and my teaching. Moreover, this course helped to inspire me to engage in the kinds of scholarship that had been put on hold during many of the years I had spent working in academic administration and raising a family.

1. Professor Douglas Kellner's graduate course in the "Introduction to Cultural Studies."

In order to pursue my research interests, I applied to, and was accepted as, a Research Scholar at the prestigious UCLA Center for the Study of Women. At this point in my returning studies, I knew that I wanted to investigate depictions and portrayals of particular marginalized peoples, in at least one of my projects, and discovered that the dialectical and polysemic nature of what is often described as "the politics of representation," was especially appropriate for these kinds of endeavors. As Douglas Kellner describes it:

Critical media literacy needs to engage the 'politics of representation' that subjects images and discourses of race, gender, sexuality, class, and other features to scrutiny and analysis, involving critique of violent masculinities, sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, and other hurtful forms of representation. A critical media literacy also positively valorizes more progressive representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality, and notes how many

cultural texts are ambiguous and contradictory in their representations. (2008: 160)

I had become patently aware of the dearth of positive representations of mature women, or what often appeared as a lack of any kinds of representation, in commercial mass media and popular culture. After further investigation, it became apparent to me that the majority of images of mature women in television often serve to perpetuate stereotypes and, in the case of older people, usually a negative one. Incorporating conceptualizations and theories from this course assisted me to approach my research, in this regard, in a far more sophisticated manner than I might otherwise have done. This encouraged me to draw on particular series, including the classic 1960s program Bewitched and the cult TV favorite The Sopranos, to demonstrate how older women continue to be depicted on television as caricatures, informed by

ageist ideologies. This method was a radically new for me, as I had never considered that I could actually engage specific media in my writings.

My research then focused on portrayals of certain ethnic (with emphasis on Jewish ones) and African American mothers in the media, from the early 1950s series The Goldbergs to such contemporary shows as Curb Your Enthusiasm and Everybody Hates Chris. I am now pursuing representations of ethnic and mothers of color within a period in which many baby boomers (generally identified as those born between 1946 and 1964) appear to be in denial about the aging process and therefore are redefining what it means to get older. This has become especially the case with consumer-based corporate media in which some television advertisements, in an effort to sell drugs or insurance, present an ultra-active senior who isn't really a "senior" at all. A welcome respite, from the classic (mis)representations, occurred in the early 2000s when such programs as Judging Amy and Six Feet Under presented more realistic and counterhegemonic depictions of older women. Unfortunately, most others continue to resort to hackneyed stereotypes.

Critical media literacy has also assisted me in my pedagogical pursuits. For example, I teach a series of courses, which I call Women Who Misbehave, for the Osher Institute at UCLA. In it, I present women and women's issues that rarely receive attention. At present I am teaching a series of classes on the Women Adventurer, includ-

ing such luminaries as Gertrude Bell, Freya Stark, Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), and Beryl Markham. These multitalented mavericks were famous in their own times, but are, sadly, largely unknown to contemporary audiences.

Indeed, to better facilitate an engaged pedagogy in the classroom, I have become literate in the production and incorporation of archival footage and video and film clips, as well as a diversity of media forms in my PowerPoint presentations. These are skills perfected from those I initially gained in Dr. Hammer's course. The latest in my multimedia PowerPoint projects is a presentation on ethnic women "who misbehaved," which will focus on such social justice mavericks as Clara Lemlich, Emma Lazarus, and Emma Goldman. The employment of these kinds of media productions has become mandatory for effective contemporary education.

Social activism today is also unquestionably dependent upon media interpretations. As President of the Board of P.A.T.H. (People Assisting the Homeless), I am often asked to present a positive image of the homeless and the work that we are doing in the community. It is essential that the homeless be presented as individuals who are similar to those of us who are not homeless—that is, as people with goals and hopes. Dr. Hammer's course clarified for me not only how we think we are projecting ideas, concepts, and images but also how the viewer interprets these. The politics of representation promotes, ultimately, more or less assistance for the homeless. It is in this sense, that I have endeavored to develop media presentations that further the objectives of

increased public awareness and involvement.

It is incumbent on any educated person to thoroughly understand the implications of the media. Undoubtedly, Dr. Hammer is doing a great service in educating her students to become cognizant of its pervasive manipulation. Because the course is not only theoretical but also pragmatic, it is highly accessible to students, regardless of their background or experience. I have readily applied her course material to my divergent interests and consider myself lucky to have discovered her class.

REFERENCES

Kellner, Douglas. 2008. Guys and Guns Amok: Domestic Terrorism and School Shootings from the Oklahoma City Bombing to the Virginia Tech Massacre. Boulder: Paradigm.

Myrna A. Hant has been a CSW Research Scholar since 2001. Her research focus is popular culture/television with an emphasis on portrayals of 50+ women and men in the media. She is the author of articles on older mothers/women on primetime television programs such as Bewitched, All in the Family, The Sopranos, and Curb Your Enthusiasm. With a Master's in English, an M.B.A., and a Ph.D., Dr. Hant is an instructor in gender studies and later-life transitions at the UCLA Osher Institute.