In this essay, I want to argue for the importance of teaching critical media literacy from a dialectical perspective which encompasses both theory and practice. Indeed, since we are "immersed from cradle to grave" in media culture, it is essential that we teach and continue to learn about the multidimensional, and complex nature of media production and critical cultural studies. It is in this sense, that teaching these kinds of courses can be - as bell hooks (1994) describes it - a transgressive process, and liberatory experience, for both teachers and students. This kind of insurgent education can also, however, meet with resistance, especially within more conservative educational environments.

It is within this context that I will discuss a joint undergraduate/graduate, education/women's studies course in critical media literacy, which I have been teaching for three years at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The course is a unique one for UCLA, as it is the only course, outside of the film school, which incorporates a practical component in which students produce a short counter-hegemonic video montage and/or web site.[1]

The development of this course was based on a number of courses I had been teaching at other universities, as well as my own experiences as a grassroots video and educational producer. It is also based on my trans-disciplinary academic background and research which includes dimensions of communications, sociology, education, feminisms, critical race and colonization theories, as well as cultural studies.

I will begin with a short presentation of some of my related background in production and teaching, discuss this particular course and then discuss some excerpts of student productions.

I began doing video in the early 1970s through a non-credit workshop and communications course at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver (although I had used video for a supplementary school project at York University in Toronto the year before…and became hooked!). In those days, portable video systems (called porta-paks) were state of the art and were being used by numbers of diverse groups and individuals, who had never had access to this kind of inexpensive media equipment. The porta-pak was hardly portable by today's standards, and was comprised of a bulky video reel to reel deck which you had to thread by hand, and a rather large camera, tripod, battery and sometimes a separate microphone. Moreover, this early video system only recorded in black and white, and editing was done using reel to reel tapes and a grease pencil and later, with a rudimentary linear computer editing system and cassette videotapes.

Many argue that the field of media production became democratized with the advent of portable videos, in that film production was often financially prohibitive (and demanded more sophisticated training and expertise). Artists, dancers, musicians, activists, documentary producers, teachers and even

filmmakers, to name a few, took advantage of this new accessible media form. In fact, the YIPPIES (a 1960s political, social movement; the Youth International Political Party) used video for their campaign to run a pig for president in 1968. Video production classes were also incorporated into many schools, including universities. Much of my own video experiences were due to the availability of this equipment through educational forums.

I taught video in the community and in the university and worked on a number of grants producing educational videos for many years. These included teaching and productions for the Canadian Labour Congress and British Columbia Federation of Labour, as well as a video series on senior citizens and women in management for Continuing Studies at Simon Fraser University in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I took advantage of video production courses, non-credit workshops and video collectives in Vancouver, to further my understanding and production experiences. Much of my formal training was gained through a position, as a television assistant, in the early 1980s, at the Simon Fraser Instructional Media Centre, where I was the only woman in television production at that time. I also did contract work, which included a diversity of production jobs, with an emphasis on editing, at the University of Toronto Media Center in the 1980s and early 1990s. In addition, I did much of this work while I was a student, and continued to be fascinated with the multiple dimensions of video, which affected the ways in which I viewed the world.[2]

I found that doing video often clarified and gave new meanings to many of the theoretical notions I was studying; not only communications, media theory and cultural studies, but also sociological, pedagogical and feminist concerns. In fact I spent some years, in graduate school, studying and writing about the complex nature of "ideology."

Critical studies of media and video production helped me to understand more about this multi-leveled process and how deeply it is embedded in the media of everyday life. For example, the technical codes of film and video production are rarely (if ever) objective and often communicate ideological values and beliefs. High and low camera angle shots can symbolize positions of domination and subordination (film noirs of the 1940s and 1950s were infamous for the manner in which they depicted women as evil, employing technical codes of lighting, camera movements, angles, music and/or sound effects). Programs like *60 Minutes* often use camera and editing techniques to manipulate audience readings of interviewees (for example, zooming in on a subject's face, especially when they are sweating, can make the interviewee appear to be nervous and dishonest). Richard Nixon learned this lesson the hard way during his unsuccessful presidential campaign against John Kennedy in the 1960s. I have found that employing these kinds of examples is an essential component of effective media teaching.

Hence, it is crucial that critical media literacy pedagogy involves the identification of ideological codes and dominant and resistant social values and beliefs embedded in media texts, in both form and content. Understanding that these kinds of codes often operate at unconscious levels, through symbolic forms, becomes imperative. Semiotics (which is the study of signs) also greatly assisted me in my understanding and teaching of media literacy and practice, as well as the significance of the symbolic dimensions of media.

I began to include these various ideas and concepts into courses I taught in video production in the early to mid- 90s at the University of Windsor in Canada. I was initially told that video courses, in the past, had primarily employed television studio equipment and were taught as traditional commercial television classes. One of the most common productions was student news or newsgathering programs. Moreover, it seemed - like many other schools - that film was considered the most prestigious and credible arena of media production. And many of the student films, at that time, appeared to adapt the kinds of "slasher" themes and techniques which were especially popular in commercial media. (Although, there was usually a classic university student 'angst' film, which often featured a depressed and stressed out male protagonist who randomly shoots innocent students, on campus – often from a tower, or high building – and then offs himself).

Even in the film school at UCLA, I have been told that many of the students are producing films which meet commercial market interests rather than alternative forums. There appears to be a growing opposition, in many film and video schools, to the production of oppositional or alternative media; although we are seeing an astonishing rise in radical documentary production by progressive individuals and organizations, as well as public television (for example, the documentaries of Michael Moore; Media Education Foundation [MEF]; Women Make Movies; and PBS programs like *Frontline* and *Independent Lens*).

My courses involved theoretical and practical dimensions of media literacy, which were geared towards progressive forms of portable video production. Although, some of my departmental peers at the University of Windsor were antagonistic to my methods and ideas (especially the technicians who were in charge of all equipment and even taught some of the basic skills classes). I began teaching a course on video production which included theory and practice and encouraged the students to produce progressive projects which reflected their own "voice." Some of their assignments, which included the production of anti-commercials and/or anti-rock videos, demanded that we study technical and popular media's representative, symbolic and narrative codes and try to subvert them.

I was so amazed by the commitment and enthusiasm of many of the students and the innovation and creativity of their video projects that I encouraged

them to work on a longer project which we viewed as a kind of "scholarly rock video." Many students and teachers have become convinced that an adaptation of rock video formats, which employ highly diverse and complex edits, is one of the most effective genres of progressive educational videos (Many of the MEF [http://www.mediaed.org] productions use this kind of format). It is within this context that I arranged for the students to get course credit to attend and videotape sessions of the Annual Popular Cultures Studies conference which was held in Toronto, Canada in 1990.

Despite challenges, we managed to capture a lot of useable footage and presented, a year later at the PCA 1991 conference, a 100 minute edited montage of highlights of various sessions of the 1990 meetings. (We also won a conference award for the video). This experience, although highly stressful and incredibly frustrating at times, convinced me of the significance of progressive student media production within the context of critical approaches, like cultural studies.

Moreover, introducing undergraduate students to academic pursuits, like scholarly conferences – especially those which explore critical themes – is often a revelatory experience for them. Many of the students, for the first time, understood the empowering nature of education, which was at odds with what Paulo Freire characterized as the banking system of education, which is unfortunately the norm in too many schools and universities.

Many of the students employed quick editing and other production codes specific to rock video (and advertising) in their video projects and this became an important part of my own productions, research and teaching. This was especially related to the role of contradiction and paradox in media. In particular, we began to examine the multiple ideological and technical codes and levels being employed in the semiotics of media texts. Some of the student exercises involved watching media without the sound. These exercises also helped with learning about iconic codes, camera techniques, lighting, etc. We also began to examine the hierarchical relations and levels of meanings encoded in media texts. For example, how important was the music in meta-communicating about the iconic text? Questions involving the relationship of technical forms and substantive meaning, in media culture, began to evolve.

I stopped producing and teaching media in the mid to late 1990s, largely to pursue my academic pursuits which included finishing my dissertation (on women, violence, feminisms and meta-critical perspectives) and publishing in areas of feminisms, critical pedagogy, globalization and cultural studies. I had relocated to the United States and to Los Angeles in 1998 and was teaching part-time at the University of Southern California (USC) and then UCLA, in women's studies, sociology, communications and education. And although I had developed an exciting course for women's studies and communications called "Media, Gender, Race, Class and Sexuality," I was missing teaching about, and doing, media

production. Moreover, the media course I was teaching seemed to lack an important dimension of pedagogy which, I believe, was best addressed by student practice in media forms.

This seemed especially relevant, given the importance of the computer and technological revolutions which characterize the new millennium. Yet so many schools and universities were ignoring the very real needs of students to become literate in these kinds of essential practical skills.

Although USC has recently begun to teach film/television/media courses to their general undergraduate population, UCLA continues to largely restrict television/film/and digital computer media production to their film and television schools. At most universities, it seems as if "there is an elephant in the room" when it comes to addressing these kinds of urgent and relevant needs.[3]

I decided to propose a course in critical media literacy which addressed theory and production to a number of programs at UCLA. Fortunately, Education and Women's Studies agreed to co-sponsor an undergraduate/graduate course, provided I could arrange for all of the necessary technical resources. Indeed, planning this course became a course in itself!

For those of you who want to be involved in this kind of work, be aware that although some universities and colleges have one separate, self-contained instructional media and/or AV center, many have a number of separate media resource centers which are often administrated by different departments, schools or divisions. In the case of UCLA most of them knew very little about the other's existence and/or services.

Regardless, I managed to find a few digital 8 and mini-dv cameras from the university's Audio Visual Department as well as from the Educational Technology Unit (ETU) at UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. I also discovered an amazing facility called the Instructional Media Production Lab (IMPL), (not to be confused with the Instructional Media Lab [IML] where students can watch films). This space provided firewire drives (to store video), computer editing systems and instruction which were open to all undergraduate and graduate students, outside of the film school. In this lab they taught the students *Dreamweaver* for webpage production, and *Final Cut Pro* for editing. The resources were limited to about 20 stations for video production for the classroom labs, which they taught. I scheduled a one hour lab for each week, plus students could work on their productions in this facility.

Unfortunately, thanks in large part to Arnold Schwarzenegger's educational cut-backs, the Instructional Media Production Center "disappeared" in 2003. I did manage, however, to employ the resources of the Computer Library Instructional Computing Commons (CLICC), in UCLA's College Library, for the production labs. They provide paid student assistants to help the students learn *Dreamweaver* (for web page production) and *I-Movie*. In addition, the Social

Science Computing Center (SSC) also provided services to teach student web page production. And many of the administrators and resource people in the various technical centers and programs have been extremely supportive of the class

However, the limited resources do constrain enrollment (although new purchases of fire-wire drives have allowed me to increase it to 25-30, in 2004). Also, equipment and time restrictions have limited the amount of original footage the students can produce. Hence, I encourage them to use media to critique media. Many of the videos and web sites employ these kinds of techniques.

The course is now in its third year and has been renewed for next year. I thought I would briefly describe the course, as I teach it. (The course syllabus is available at, http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/04F/womencm178-1/syllabus.htm). However, I believe that the success of – and importance of this kind of course- is best communicated through the student productions. The following links provide a few examples of student projects:

> 1) http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/~cm178g2/hompepage.html
> STREAMING VIDEOS (video projects)
> 2) http://women.ucla.edu/faculty/hammer/medialiteracy.htm
> USER NAME: medialiteracy PASSWORD: video
> 3) http://women.ucla.edu/faculty/hammer/medialiteracy2004.htm
> USER NAME: medialiteracy PASSWORD: video
> 4) http://women.ucla.edu/faculty/hammer/medialiteracy2005.htm
> USER NAME: medialiteracy PASSWORD: video

The course has a three hour seminar and a one hour lab each week. Due to the nature of the assignments (especially the counter-hegemonic group media production) students spend an inordinate amount of time on the projects. I have, however, only had one student drop during the course – in three years - although I do lose a few students after the first class when they hear what is involved and the amount of time it takes to produce a media project.

Because I believe so strongly in the dialectic of theory and practice, the students are required to do particular readings from the course reader, as well as produce a short analytical final paper in which they discuss their group project within the context of critical media literacy. They are asked to incorporate course readings, guest lectures and films presented in the class. Notions of ideology and hegemony as well as the "politics of representation" in media (which includes dimensions of sexism, racism, classism and homophobia, to name a few) are central concerns. Also the ideas and realities of resistance, social and political change and agency are emphasized.

The assignments include: a camera techniques exercise, a basic web page, a storyboard and editing assignment, as well as the final take-home paper and group alternative media project.

The three hour seminar is comprised of short lectures and discussions, related to the required readings; guest lectures and presentations; and presentations of excerpts from a variety of different genres of media – primarily alternative and usually documentary style. Different genres of films are also discussed and analyzed.

Some of the films and or videos I have shown are excerpts from classic cinema verites – including Frederick Wiseman's *High School* (1968); feminist/labour documentaries, which embrace dimensions of oral history, like Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, USA* (1977) and Julia Reichert, James Klein and Miles Mogulescu's *Union Maids* (1977), some National Film Board of Canada (NFB) documentaries; rock videos like the classic Michael Jackson *Thriller* (1982); mockumentaries like Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984;); Michael Moore and Errol Morris television and film productions; videos like *The Mickey Mouse Conspiracy: Disney, Childhood and Corporate Power* (2001); *Tough Guise: Violence, Media and Masculinity* (2001) and *Killing Us Softly 3*: *Advertising's Image of Women* (2001); Ngozi Onwurah's *And Still I Rise* (1993) produced and/or distributed by alternative media organizations like MEF (Media Education Foundation) and Women Make Movies, as well as such independent productions as *Slaying the Dragon* (1988) and *The Bronze Screen: 100 Years of the Latino Image in Hollywood Films* (2002) (to name a few). I also present (or invite students to present) student videos from previous courses as well as some of my own work, if there is time. I also show some instructional production videos on camera techniques, lighting, sound and editing, for example. I try to keep up with new cutting edge works and found that videos like Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbot and Joel Bakan's *"The Corporation,"* (2003) Robert Greenwald's *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (2005) and Morgan Spurlock's *Supersize Me* (2004) were highly effective and provoked much interest and discussion.

I stress the importance of editing and show examples from classic films, like Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), to demonstrate the significance of good editing. Here is an example of the effectiveness of clever editing, which was posted on the Internet. It is an edit of George Bush's 2003 State of the Nation address on the Internet at: http://fuckitall.com.

Guest speakers and presentations have included Jeff Share of the California Center for Media Literacy and UCLA; Douglas Kellner (UCLA) on Emile de Antonio, alternative public access television, and blogging; Leah Lievrouw (UCLA) on the history of the internet and oppositional cybermedia; plus an activist film or video maker. For example, this year Joan Sekler, the co-

producer, director and writer for the award-winning 2002 documentary *Unprecedented: the 2000 Presidential Election* was a guest in the class.

I also put together a reader that organizes critical media/literacy according to four major sections: 1) "Foundational Readings" which include key theoretical readings on critical media literacy and cultural studies. The text includes articles by bell hooks, Stuart Hall, Robert McChesney, Doug Kellner, Zillah Eisenstein, as well as some of my own. There are a number of articles on semiotics, the Internet, cyberspace, political economy of media, as well as various dimensions of media criticism in this section. 2) The Second Section is called "Film/Video Makers: Practical Dimensions" and includes articles about cinema verite, feminist documentaries and particularly activist filmmakers such as Emile D'Antonio and Frederick Wiseman. 3) The Third Section of the reader is on "Practical/Technical Skills" and includes readings on production techniques. 4) The Final Section is called: "Critical Media Literacies: Cultural Studies Selected Topics." These readings include articles on cyberschooling; music videos; Barbie, Disney and McDonald's, as well as fan and hate sites on the Internet. Articles by Susan Faludi, Henry Giroux and Carmen Luke are included in this section. These articles often assist students in formulating topics for their group projects.

Student projects have included exceptional web sites. The web site "Illuminations," for example, on Frankfurt School Critical Theory, redeveloped by Clayton Pierce, is an excellent resource for work in cultural studies (http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/courses/2004/ed278/illumina).

A number of videos, which interrogate dimensions of representations of gender, race and heterosexism in a variety of media forms, have been produced. Moreover, many employ different documentary genres which include interviews, scripts and voice-overs (see student web site addresses above).

Although teaching this kind of course can be stressful, to say the least -- and sometimes underappreciated by not only your peers but the educational institution which sponsors it -– I encourage you all to consider teaching and doing research on critical media literacy which incorporates theory and practice. From my own personal experience, I can tell you that the student support for this kind of work makes it incredibly worthwhile.

Notes

[1] See the course syllabus at: http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/04F/womencm178-1/syllabus.htm
[2] My video productions and co-productions include: *Right to Work* (1977), CLC/Simon Fraser University (on "Right to Work" Legislation); *Women Writing Around the World* (1990) (montage of international conference at University of

Toronto), *Conversations on Postmodernism and Cultural Studies* (1991); *Adjust Your Set: The Static is Real* (1994) (on harassment of students in the university), University of Toronto Media Center; PCA 90 – "The Video," 1991, (montage of presentations at Popular Culture Association) Meetings); *From Zine to Zone: On Media Fandom* (1993). I have also worked on many productions with students in Canada and the United States.

[3] The *New York Times* recently published an article, by Elizabeth Van Ness, "Is Cinema Studies the New MBA?," May 6, 2005, which addresses the significance of media literacy for contemporary students.

Acknowledgements

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