No Zombies Allowed

Let there be no doubt: a "skilled" minority person who is not also capable of critical analysis becomes the trainable, low-level functionary of the dominant society, simply the grease that keeps the institutions which orchestrate his or her oppression running smoothly. On the other hand, a critical thinker who lacks the "skills" demanded by employers and institutions of higher learning can aspire to financial and social status only within the disenfranchised underworld.

—Lisa Delpit, Other People's Children

"This class is called Media Studies," I announced to the poker-faced collection of eighth graders who had just assembled before me. It was the first period of the first day of my fourth year as a teacher, the first time I'd begun a school year with a full-sized classroom of my own, and my first day of being at the helm of this newly invented, untried course.

I hate first days. When I was 8, I'd ended up in the hospital after a bike wreck during my family's first day at a new house. A dozen or so years later, on my first day on the transportation crew of a feature film, I'd wrecked the wardrobe truck I was responsible for driving. On my first day as a substitute, the kids had run so many laps around the room and the adjoining coat closet that they had me searching the teacher's desk for a checkered flag. During my first 6 years in the classroom, I never had a good first day. Perhaps my insistence on kicking things off each year with a plodding, long-winded opening speech had something to do with it.

"The class is made up of two parts," I continued, palms resting on a wobbly podium, "video production and critical viewing—or critical examination—of the media. We'll talk about what those are in a minute. But first I want to be clear about something right from the start. I know you're all looking behind me, checking out these cameras and the other equipment in here." It was like trying to hold class in front of a toy store window or in the stands at a Bulls game. "But let me tell you this. The point of this class is not to turn you into movie stars, or even to teach you how to operate a video camera—though that's a small part of it. This class is about much more than that. For one thing, it's about you becoming more confident about speaking up and expressing yourself, not just when cameras are rolling, but anytime. It's about helping you realize that each of you has important things to say. It's about giving you opportunities to be creative. And it's about teaching you to look at television—and other media, too—more intelligently. What many of us do when we turn on the TV is turn off our brains. We don't really think much about what it is we're watching and why. But I want you guys to start thinking. I want you to be smarter than your TVs."

As I paused to take a much-needed breath, a hand went up to my right. "Question?"

"Yeah. When do we get to start using the cameras?" So much for my strategically planned introduction.

The idea for the Media Studies course had evolved out of another idea—an after-school video production crew that I'd begun the year before. Marcey Reyes, Quincy's new principal, had been impressed with the kids' work and how well they used the medium of video to communicate. She thought all of Quincy's upper graders could benefit from such an experience, and suggested I expand the after-school program into a full-fledged video production class. When the time came to make the next fall's teaching assignments, Marcey allocated classroom space for a makeshift studio and gave me free rein to design my own course.

I began planning the class over the summer, unsure of what its exact scope or sequence should be. Most high school TV studio programs I knew of emphasized the technical or vocational side of things. Another approach was to teach video the way one might teach sculpting or painting, as an art form. But both of these approaches seemed too narrow, too limiting. Of course I wanted to teach the kids technical skills, and I wanted them to learn to use video as a tool to express their creativity and ideas. But I also wanted to help them become more active and aware as viewers of television and consumers of media. For most, TV was where they got the bulk of their information about the world outside their neighborhood. They watched it before school and after school, sometimes late into the night. It influenced them in both blatantly direct and artfully camouflaged ways. Viewed in this light, teaching kids to make TV without teaching them to understand it seemed as if it might do more harm than good. I decided that the course should attempt to combine the basics of production with a critical study of mass media, television in particular.

I knew that a media studies course would likely be met with skepticism by certain teachers at Quincy, who believed that any time in school away from reading, writing, and arithmetic was time wasted. They would...
probably see it as an extra, a fluff course that was but one more step away from the all-important “basics” in which our children were seen to be so sorely lacking. But what could be more basic, for kids growing up in the media-drenched, commercially saturated 1990s, than the ability to question, analyze, and evaluate the barrage of messages that bombarded them? Wasn’t that one of the marks of a truly literate person? Wasn’t that what we were after?

“To succeed in this class, you have to think,” I told the kids after my opening monologue had finally reached its end. “No zombies allowed.”

“To think?” added Nacho with a jab at the air. “All right, let’s say you’re from another planet,” I told the kids. “You don’t know anything about what humans are like, what teenagers are like, and you land your spaceship at the Jerry Springer show. If that’s all the evidence you have to go on, what are you going to think teenagers are like?”

“I’d think they were stupid.”

“Crazy.”

“Disrespectful.”

“Dangerous.”

“It’s a lotta stereotypes,” summed up Nacho, grinning slyly at his use of a recent vocabulary word.

“We wanna see the rest!” We had just finished viewing a 10-minute clip of the Jerry Springer show entitled “I’m a 13-Year-Old Prostitute.” The subject in question had confided to Jerry and an amused studio audience that with her mother’s encouragement, she had begun taking drugs at 7, having sex at 8, and prostituting at 9. Just before the first commercial break, there had been a teaser for the next segment that showed the girl and her mother about to come to blows.

“You don’t need to see the rest,” I insisted. “You already know what’s gonna happen.”

“Her mom’s gonna come out and they’re gonna box!” acknowledged Nacho with a jab at the air.

“We wanna see her clip her ma!” added Claudia.

“See?” I said to the class. “You already know what’s coming. It’s so predictable. If you’ve seen one of this genre, you’ve seen them all.” I could see a couple of the kids rolling the word genre over in the heads.

“Genre, genre . . . I can’t remember what’s genre,” said Nacho.

“Who remembers?” I asked. “What’s a genre?” Several students be-
"They weren't trying to help her!" Claudio exclaimed.

"Hang on a second, Claudio. Give her a chance," I said. "Silvia, why do you think that? What happened on the show to make you think that?"

"Well, after she told about all the stuff that she done, Jerry asked her if she wanted to stop—"

"And then the audience all started cheering like she could just stop 'cause he said so," Claudio added. "That's stupid."

"So what do you think the main purpose of the show was?" I asked Claudio.

"Simple. To entertain. You heard all those people laughing. They weren't taking it serious."

"Anybody agree with Claudio?"

I'd agreed with both of them," Abraham answered. "The show started off all serious, like showing the girl looking straight in the camera—and it was in black and white, an extreme close-up shot—telling what had happened to her. So it seemed like, you know, a serious thing. But then when they introduced Jerry, he came running out giving high fives and the crowd was all, "Jerry! Jerry!" like they were at a wrestling match."

"I don't think they had any respect for the girl," commented Paloma.

"'Cause when she would talk and they would put her name up on the screen, underneath it would say '13-year-old prostitute.' Like that was her job. I don't think they told her they were gonna do that."

"Do you think she went on the show thinking she would get help?"

"I think so," said Silvia softly. "She just wanted to be on TV," Claudio countered. "She's just up there making a fool of herself."

"Well, you shouldn't be laughing about it," Paloma told him. "There's nothing funny about it."

"I agree," I said. "It shouldn't be funny. But they showed people in the audience laughing and I saw some of you guys laughing, too. Why is it funny?"

"'Cause it's happening to her and not us," admitted Nacho.

"What if it was your sister up there?"

"Then he wouldn't be laughing," Silvia offered.

"How could the producers have made this program—without the same topic, and the same guests—in a different way?" I asked. "In a way that would have been more respectful and more helpful."

"The first thing they could've done is change the title," said Paloma.

"And not be so hyper about it."

I sat down at the table next to Silvia. "You guys know what it means to get used by a friend or boyfriend or girlfriend, right?"

"They take advantage of you."

"Do you think that girl—and other guests on talk shows—get used in a sense by the producers and the hosts?"

"Yeah," answered the kids as a chorus.

"And so do we," Paloma added. "We get used, too."

"How?" I asked, not sure where she was headed.

"'Cause we watch 'em."

For homework, the kids were assigned to watch a talk show and answer several questions about its content and how it was presented. Specifically, they were asked to identify ways in which the guests or the topics were exploited. A few weeks later, after several days of preparation and planning, Paloma and her classmates produced their own talk show on the topic of domestic violence, with guests from a local counseling center. The format resembled the talk shows we had discussed in class, but the style was much different: No one was yelled at, cursed at, punched, kicked, or called names during the entire show.

An important consideration in any media literacy course, I came to realize, is using programs the kids watch as texts for study. This might be soap operas, pro wrestling, music videos, commercials, cartoons—whatever students at a given age are spending their time viewing. Trying to indoctrinate them with "quality" television isn't the point. Better to teach them to become more discriminating themselves, to be able to see through the glitz and pseudo-style of a program to what lies underneath. While tabloid talk shows such as Ricki Lake and reality-based shows such as Cops may seem to offer little of value to children, they are loaded with dubious underlying themes and skewed social commentary that beg a debriefing—and whether we like it or not, many kids watch them.

Some educators would shudder at the thought of using Marcia Brady or Al Bundy as subjects in serious study. But in many ways, the "texts" of which these characters are a part are richer and more multilayered than the textbooks and basal readers that clutter classroom shelves. I spent several weeks with my eighth grade classes that year examining, discussing, and comparing various situation comedies, from The Brady Bunch and Leave It to Beaver to The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air and Married with Children. We began by defining the characteristics of the genre (30 minutes long, often set in a household, audible laughter, high-key lighting, problem always resolved) as well as the different types of humor used (physical, situational misunderstandings, one-liners, insults, sexual). The kids also undertook an informal demographic study of the most popular sitcoms and discovered that there were none that featured Latino or Arabic families or characters. In addition, except for Roseanne, sitcom families ap
peared to be either upper middle class or wealthy. Most lived in houses instead of apartments. Money never seemed to be a problem. Gradually it became clearer to the kids that the lifestyle and cultural norms depicted in many sitcoms reflect only a narrow slice of America. They found little in the programs that truly looked like their own experience, and while a number of them enjoyed watching the shows, there were few who thought they were realistic. "I watch them but sometimes it gets to me," Yesenia explained one day in class. "Everybody is so happy, and everything appeared to be either upper middle class or wealthy. Most lived in houses instead of apartments. Money never seemed to be a problem. Gradually it became clearer to the kids that the lifestyle and cultural norms depicted in many sitcoms reflect only a narrow slice of America. They found little in the programs that truly looked like their own experience, and while a number of them enjoyed watching the shows, there were few who thought they were realistic. "I watch them but sometimes it gets to me," Yesenia explained one day in class. "Everybody is so happy, and everything appeared to be either upper middle class or wealthy. Most lived in houses instead of apartments. Money never seemed to be a problem. Gradually it became clearer to the kids that the lifestyle and cultural norms depicted in many sitcoms reflect only a narrow slice of America. They found little in the programs that truly looked like their own experience, and while a number of them enjoyed watching the shows, there were few who thought they were realistic. "I watch them but sometimes it gets to me," Yesenia explained one day in class. "Everybody is so happy, and everything appeared to be either upper middle class or wealthy. Most lived in houses instead of apartments. Money never seemed to be a problem. Gradually it became clearer to the kids that the lifestyle and cultural norms depicted in many sitcoms reflect only a narrow slice of America. They found little in the programs that truly looked like their own experience, and while a number of them enjoyed watching the shows, there were few who thought they were realistic. "I watch them but sometimes it gets to me," Yesenia explained one day in class. "Everybod
Lorena Hasan, whose family was among a handful of Palestinians who lived in Back of the Yards, also wrote to the head of programming at Fox. “My friends and I watch your network all the time,” she wrote, but every time we watch your comedy shows, we never see Mexicans or Arabsians as the main characters. The main reason why this bothers me so much is because no one really knows what the Mexican and Arabian cultures are all about because they’re always shown as the bad guys or made fun of. I’m not saying that your the only Network that does that, but you’re one of the main Networks that everyone watches and maybe you can change a few things.”

In closing, Lorena wrote, “I would appreciate it if you can answer my letter. Thank you.” We never received any response from Fox.

ONE OF THE THINGS I have enjoyed most about teaching Media Studies is the freedom it provides. Anything that relates even tangentially to the mass media or communication is a potential topic of study. Since I have no textbooks or state guidelines for the class, I am not bound to present a certain amount of material, or even to cover particular areas of content. If a sudden current begins to pull my students in an unexpected direction, the course gives me the flexibility to flow with it.

One spring morning, the inseparable Veronica and Teri came in to class singing, “Don’t go chasing waterfalls, please stick to the rivers and content. If a sudden current begins to pull my students in an unexpected direction, the course gives me the flexibility to flow with it." The girls had been singing it nonstop, it seemed, class singing, “Don’t go chasing waterfalls, please stick to the rivers and content. If a sudden current begins to pull my students in an unexpected direction, the course gives me the flexibility to flow with it." The girls looked at one another. “Uhhh ... waterfalls?”

“Not quite,” I said. “You two sing it every day. Have you never thought about what it is they’re talking about?”

“I just like the music,” added Veronica with a shrug of her shoulders.

I knew the feeling. As a seventh grader I had sung along with Rick James’s ode to “Mary Jane” for months before a friend clued me in that it wasn’t a girl Rick was singing about. “Tomorrow when you come in here I want you to tell me what that song’s about,” I told the girls. “You already know all the words. Just go home and write them down and think about it.”

The girls came bounding into my room the next morning before school, excitedly rattling off expliciations of the lyrics. It was the most enthusiastic response I’d gotten to a homework request in some time, and it wasn’t even a formal assignment. Maybe I should try this with all the kids, I thought. Next to television, popular music was surely the medium they connected with most passionately. I remembered my brother Kirk doing a similar project a few years earlier during his tenure as a high school English teacher, and he’d said it was one of his students’ favorites.

That night, I worked up an assignment sheet. I presented it to my students the next day. In my introduction, I talked about the “Waterfalls” episode and the fact that many people listen to music without giving much thought to a song’s meaning. The purpose of the project, I told them, was to really listen to a song. What was the story, the message, the point? Was the song provocative, truthful, poetic, stupid? I told the kids they could choose any song—current or old, English or Spanish. They were to transcribe the lyrics of the song, word for word, and prepare a presentation in which they analyzed its meaning for the class.

“Any song?” asked Frankie.

“Any song,” I said.

“What if it has some bad words in it?” Kids at Quincy didn’t call them swear words, curse words, or “cuss words,” like I had growing up in the South. They translated directly from the Spanish—malas palabras, bad words.

I thought about it for a second. I knew some of the guys listened to some pretty violent stuff, but I figured it would be good for them to reflect on what the songs meant—if anything—and to discuss them. “It’s okay if there’s some bad language,” I said, “but you should make that a part of your analysis. Tell why those words are important to the song.”

I told the kids to treat the analysis just as they would that for a poem or short story. They should discuss characters, conflict, symbolism, figurative language, moral, message, humor, and anything else that seemed important. They were to bring the song on tape or CD and type or neatly print a lyric sheet, making enough copies for the entire group.

I agonized over this last request. In some schools, in some neighborhoods, I wouldn’t have had to give it a second thought. But at Quincy, in Back of the Yards, asking the kids to come up with 12 or 14 copies on their own was something I was hesitant to do. The xerox machine at the public library cost 15¢ a copy. For 14 copies, that was a little over $2. It didn’t seem like much money, but I couldn’t be certain that all of them
could come up with it. While many had two working parents with steady, if low-paying, jobs, I had visited the homes of other kids whose apartment
ments could only be described as squallid. I didn't want to cause these
children any undue hardship or embarrassment. "It's your responsibility
to get these copies made," I told the kids. "But if you think it's going to
be a problem, see me about it. We'll work something out."
The day we were to begin the presentations, I got a message from
Pam Cronin, a teacher down the hall, asking if I could come by her room.
She needed to verify something with me. The message said it was urgent.
My next class wasn't due for another 20 minutes, so I headed to Pam's
room to see what was wrong. She came out in the hall carrying several
wrinkled sheets of notebook paper. I could see Frankie's name at the top
of one of the sheets.
"I just wanted to check this out with you," Pam said, her voice giving
me no hint as to what was coming. "Frankie wanted me to make copies
of these song lyrics for him. He said he needed them for your class, so I
said I would. On my way down to the office, I started reading them, and
I was just stunned. They're disgustingly violent, degrading to women—
more than degrading. My sons listen to some pretty horrible stuff, but
not like this. This is sick. Anyway, when I asked Frankie about it, he said
you'd approved it, so I wanted to let you handle getting the copies made.
I don't want to be responsible for it."
Pam handed me the papers and I quickly scanned the first few lines.
Now I was stunned, and I don't consider myself a person who stuns easily.
I couldn't believe Frankie had done this to me. The exact lyrics have since
evaporated from my memory, but suffice it to say that the song's title was
"Blow Job Betty" and it only got worse from there.
"What he's saying right there," Izzy explained, "is that a lot of teachers,
they can't really relate to what kids are going through 'cause they
come from a different type of background. So he's saying how's he sup­
posed to get his education if his teachers don't even understand him? He's
saying 'they front,' like, you know, they're not really trying to teach him
nothing."
About a third of the students brought in songs in Spanish. Watching
them proudly play and discuss their music, it was almost as if they felt they
were getting away with something that was against the rules; it was as if
they'd been allowed to sneak homemade "tamales and a glass of horchata
into the lunchroom. Just seeing the work that had gone into getting the
songs accurately transcribed was amazing. Chavo told me he had worked
on the words to Bone, Thugs & Harmony's slinky rap "Crossroads" for
five solid hours one night, listening to a line at a time, stopping the tape
to rewind, then playing it again, over and over and over. The lyric sheet
he turned in was three pages, typed, complete with numbered verses and
choruses.
One of the kids who I'd thought might not have the cash to get cop­
ies of his lyrics made was Miguel Salinas. He had walked around school
practically blind for 2 years because his parents, neither of whom were
legal residents, had little money and no insurance, and Miguel was too
embarrassed—or too proud—to ask for help. Finally, one of his teachers
noticed him straining to see the board and offered to take him to an opti­
cian. A week later, Miguel was wearing a pair of prescription glasses, and
his school performance, not surprisingly, almost immediately improved.
Miguel hadn't taken me up on my offer of assistance with getting
copies made, so I half-expected him not to do the assignment. Nonethe­
less, he came in on his assigned day ready to roll. He passed out copies of
the lyrics for his chosen song, a Spanish banda tune from his home state
of Guerrero, and handed me his original handwritten version. While the song was playing, I noticed that the kid next to me also had a copy that was done in blue ink. I got up and circled the table, peering over the shoulders of each student. Blue ink all the way around. Miguel had done all 14 copies by hand.

Frankie didn't do a presentation. I told him he couldn't play the song he had chosen because it was offensive to Ms. Cronin, it was offensive to me, and it probably would have been offensive to at least some of his classmates. Instead, I told him I'd like the two of us to sit down together, listen to the song, and discuss his fascination with it. I thought it was important to have Frankie think about the misogyny in the lyrics, and perhaps get him to talk about his views on women and sex. There seemed at least a possibility that there was something deeper at work; a demon of some sort that was growing unchecked inside him. So how about if we talk it over, I had asked. Cool, he'd said. Any time.

My intentions were good. I intended to follow through. I kept telling myself, "Tomorrow. I'll meet with Frankie tomorrow?" But it never happened. The year rolled on, days into weeks into months, and there was always something else that seemed more pressing, another kid or another responsibility that needed tending to first. I'll get to it, I thought. One of these days I'll just pull him out of class and we'll talk. But then June came and Frankie was gone.

I still think about Frankie on occasion. I ride through Back of the Yards sometimes thinking maybe I'll see him, and that if I do, maybe I'll jump out of the car and we'll hold class right there, breaking down the song lyrics on the concrete sidewalk. But I haven't seen him around. Maybe he's moved. Maybe-who knows? Meanwhile, time just keeps moving on. It's a teachable moment that got away, just one of many that I've knowingly let slip through my fingers.

There are times when I envy those teachers who always seem to be so sure they are doing the right thing with their students. It is rarely that way for me. No matter what I do, I am haunted by unanswered questions, nagging uncertainties, lingering doubts. I believe in the media studies course and in the opportunities it gives students. Putting the video equipment in their hands gives them a voice, a way to see themselves and their classmates. Instead, I told him I'd like the two of us to sit down together, listen to the song, and discuss his fascination with it. I thought it was important to have Frankie think about the misogyny in the lyrics, and perhaps get him to talk about his views on women and sex. There seemed at least a possibility that there was something deeper at work; a demon of some sort that was growing unchecked inside him. So how about if we talk it over, I had asked. Cool, he'd said. Any time.

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underneath the glamorous stars, the endless smiles, the applause, the bright lights. The kids with HIV seemed happy. Jerry looked like a hero.
The entire audience was dancing in the aisles. As the credits for the program began to roll, my students and I, hands raised in the air, followed the floor director's lead and swayed back and forth to the hip-hop beat. Zombies of a different sort. Chalk up one more for the opposition.

Paloma sits alone at the front of the sanctuary, a bouquet of artificial flowers in her lap, her chair only a few feet away from the priest's raised lectern. Behind her, close to 70 people, nearly all of whom are part of her extended family, are gathered in the pews of St. Peter's, a small Catholic church not far from Quincy School. It is Paloma's 15th birthday—her *quinceañera*, as it's known among Mexicans and other Latinos. It is the day, according to Mexican Catholic tradition, when a young woman's coming of age is to be recognized and celebrated.

The first time I attended a *quinceañera* for a former student, I had been taken aback by the elegance and expense of it all. I hadn't known what to expect. Nothing in my upbringing had prepared me for it. Like Paloma, the girl of honor that day was decked out in what looked to me like an elaborate wedding dress, and was escorted down the church aisle by five young men in matching tuxedos, her *chambelanes*. Later, following a catered buffet dinner at a far South Side banquet hall, she and the *chambelanes* danced a highly choreographed waltz to inaugurate the cotillion, or formal ball, that concluded the day's festivities. As I watched, I couldn't help thinking about how much money the whole thing must have cost the girl's mother, who otherwise barely eked out a modest living. I imagined that every person in her family had been made to scrimp and sacrifice for months just to afford it.

Money isn't quite so tight for Paloma's parents, who co-manage a small but successful construction business that her father started several years back. They listen from the front pew as Father Alberto, the diminutive but animated young priest, coincidentally recounts the Biblical parable of the two house builders—one who built his house on rock, and the other who constructed his on sand.

"So where are you going to build your house?" questions Father Alberto in a call-and-response style that seems to catch many in the crowd by surprise.

"On the rock!" scattered voices answer back.
"¿Dónde?"
"¡En la roca!"
Holler If You Hear Me
The Education of a Teacher and His Students

GREGORY MICHIE

FOREWORD BY
SANDRA CISNEROS

SERIES FOREWORD BY
WILLIAM AYERS AND THERESE QUINN

Teachers College, Columbia University
New York and London
To my best and most patient teachers, my parents,
Mary Carol and George Michie,
whose concern for other people's children is surpassed only by their love for their own.

To the memory of five remarkable educators
Bobbie Goodrum
Joe Humphrey
John Nichols
Frank Ponce
Shirley Traback

And to the memory of
Carlos Alvidrez
Lena Ayesh
Kenneth Cruz
Matthew Flynn
Gabriel Godinez
Delvon Harris
Jose "Beto" Montelongo
Robert Owens
Erika Quintero
Adriana Rodriguez
Ten who died too young.