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Michael Hoechsmann

Right in the middle of a contradiction, isn't always a bad place to be.

—Bono (Lee, 2007).

Philanthropy is like hippy music, holding hands. Red is more like punk rock, hip hop; this should feel like hard commerce.

—Bono (Weber, 2006).

What does a fabulously wealthy rock star, one who moonlights as a human rights activist in the global struggles to eradicate poverty and confront the HIV/AIDS pandemic, have to teach us in an era of globalization? If we accept the premise that the media is a distorting mirror, one that reflects back to us attitudes and worldviews already circulating in our milieu, then the answer is a lot. One of the objectives of media literacy is to cultivate the critical abilities of students—or media consumers more generally—to analyze media texts and the cultural practices associated with them such as fandom, fashion, dance crazes, remixing (or bricolage), consumerism, culture jamming, etc. Picking apart Bono as a media phenomenon seems straight forward at first blush: he is either an opportunist sell-out, using his fans' social concerns to line his pockets, or he is the second coming, a rock star who really cares, a person who will sacrifice some of the trappings of his privilege to help others. Analyzing Bono as a media text might show a folksy, populist image (the broken-down hat, the blue jeans), mixed with a dash of Monaco chic (the ubiquitous coloured shades), a cross between hyperactive hippy and down-home star. The problem with essentializing Bono, however, of treating him as a fixed object of analysis, is that we lose sight of the forest for the trees. Bono, for the sake of argument here, is a fiction created by his fans. Bono represents us - our hopes, dreams and fears. He is but a distorting mirror which reflects back to us many of the values and norms we take for granted. Reading Bono also means reading the social and cultural conditions of our times.

Presumably Bono looked into the mirror when he went shopping at the GAP

with his good friend Oprah last October 13th. Painting the town red was given a new meaning when this famous pair went on a little spending spree to celebrate the launch of the Product Red campaign, a donations-from-profit campaign that siphons on average 40% of the profits from the sale of selected products (Weber, 2006) to the Global Fund, an organization that funds direct intervention projects that target the spread and treatment of HIV-AIDS, primarily in Africa. The Red campaign, co-chaired by junior-Kennedy Bobby Shriver, aims to channel the hyper-consumerism of the global North—where ‘to buy is to be’ in the circuits of identity formation and performative selves—into an economic force for front-line health care in Africa. Says Bono:

AIDS in Africa is an emergency, that’s why we chose the color Red. When you buy a (PRODUCT) RED product, the company gives money to buy pills that will keep someone in Africa alive. The idea is simple, the products are sexy and people live instead of die. It’s consumer power at work for those who have no power at all. (Cosmoworlds, 2006)

The concept is great, once one capitulates to the ‘only game in town’ theory of advanced capitalism, and the ideological baggage is breathtaking. Products are sexy, consumers are powerful, and corporations are magnanimous. In one beautiful flourish, Bono held up an Amex Red Card with the words “This card is designed to eliminate HIV in Africa” written on the back. “This is really sexy to me,” Bono said. “It is sexy to want to change the world” (Evening Standard, 2006). Sexy is the currency of the culture of consumerism, so there is presumably nothing out of place in equating a credit card with sexiness and it is a welcome development to make social change on a global stage appear sexy. ‘Bring it on,’ we might want to say. And Bono is complying, even at some risk to his reputation if one of his corporate partners turns out to be next week’s child labour scandal. He remarked that “with 6,500 people dying every day, it’s worth a rock star ending up with a little bit of egg on his face” (Weber, 2006).

Bono is a walking contradiction, at once a merchant of cool, a self interested capitalist, and simultaneously one of the world’s most famous social justice activists. Bono has been in the news a lot in the last two years, not just for releasing platinum-selling, Grammy-winning *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* and for leading U2 on the Vertigo tour, the second highest grossing tour in rock and roll history at \$377 million, but also for his lobbying of world leaders before and after the G8, his involvement in the global network of rock concerts called Live 8, his co-award with Bill and Melinda Gates as TIME magazine’s Person of the Year in 2005 and, incredibly, his nomination with Bob Geldof for two years running for a Nobel Peace Prize. There is no precedent for Bono. A fair number of celebrities step off the stage or out from the silver screen to play small parts on the global stage such as UNICEF Goodwill Ambassadors, and occasionally a celebrity or group of celebrities plays a role in an unfolding drama such as the British ska group The Specials did in releasing

the anthemic “Free Nelson Mandela.” But Bono, the free lancing, moon-lighting rock star politico, who is equally at home hob-nobbing world leaders at Davos as performing in front of audiences of thousands, has no peer.

There is no easy answer for the Bono effect, but it is of signal importance to recognize that there is a glimmer of hope presented in his massive popularity. At a time when it appears that young people in the global North are under the thrall of mass mediated identity texts, I would like to make the claim that many youth are “buying in but not selling out.” Wandering in the streets of Granada, Spain in 2005, I was struck by the slogan “Bono for Pope” on a t-shirt. Googling it at home in Montreal, I found Bono for Pope on-line petitions and blogs. This playful intervention on another media event of 2005, the naming of a new Pope, has me thinking of the role of the media in naming our cultural worlds, in articulating values and norms that circulate among us, even while distorting them along the way. What might appear on the surface as obvious—here is a rock star trading on his celebrity to make a more lasting, positive mark on the world—is not so when we scratch below to see what he tells us about the tenor our times. We have to understand that Bono—the person, the rock star, the lobbyist and activist that exists in a material sense—is also a “stand-in,” a body-double, for a set of values and norms that are circulating in our world.

Media Literacy and Media Education

Media education provides teachers and learners the opportunity to engage in the study of contemporary social and cultural values and to situate the curriculum in a meaningful manner in the lived realities of the students. It is a realm of inquiry that treats contemporary forms and practices as historically situated and thus enables the study of resonant social and cultural matters faced by young people. It is at once consumption and production oriented. Central to the project of media education is the teaching of critical interpretation techniques for decoding media texts and phenomena and technical skills for producing, or encoding, media products. In this paper, however, I would like to argue for a third aspect to media education, a grounded approach to cultural studies in media education. For the sake of not shrouding this concept behind a veil of impenetrable language, I will put this in straightforward terms: Media Education offers teachers the opportunity to gain some understanding of their students’ lifeworlds. It is a collaborative crash course on culture and cultural change as lived by the students who inhabit the classroom or community centre. Before describing the cultural studies approach further, some terms need to be addressed. First is the distinction between media literacy and media education.

Media Literacy

(1) Like literacy, a schooled capacity and competency, an ability to interpret and produce media texts. The result of formal media education. An essential element of citizenship engagement in a media saturated culture.

- (2) Like speech, a domain of learning also outside of schools, one children begin to develop years before they come to school.

Media Education

- (1) Teaching/learning about the media industry and how to interpret multiple forms of media. Teaching/learning codes and conventions of media genres and how to undertake semiotic and content analyses.
- (2) Teaching/learning to produce multiple forms of media, print, visual and oral/aural.
- (3) An engagement, both by educators and students, with the evolving culture(s) youth inhabit.

Two key points should be raised in relation to this definition of media literacy and media education. First, media literacy is not something only learned from teachers. Inhabiting a media saturated world by necessity involves an immersion in the codes and conventions of media and a learning process, though later in childhood, equivalent to that of learning a first language. Examples of this are the critical capacities of eight year olds to see through the false promises of advertising and the gradual accumulation by children of procedural knowledge of media cues (this is a flashback sequence; there was a cut in the dramatic sequence from one location to another; a close-up of an object—a knife, for example—suggests a future development in the plot). To see how television teaches its viewers these cues over time, starting simply and gradually becoming more complex, one only has to look at a typical demographic progression, say from Barney through Scooby Doo to The OC. The learning curve that the typical young person embarks on is also one that the culture as a whole has undertaken over the last 60 years as television in particular, and the media in general, has become more complex and sophisticated (Johnson, 2005). Given that media literacy is not something learned only in structured learning environments, there are two wild cards embedded in media education from the start. On the one hand, there is the hand of the powerful in the mix—media corporations and those corporations whose products are pitched in the media. On the other, there is an insider knowledge already possessed by the learner, one which in many instances outstrips that of the teacher (Jenkins, 2006).

The second point to be made in relation to this unschooled media literacy is that it contains elements of the changing cultural context(s) young people experience as their immediate environment, a set of contexts that are more familiar and less alien to youth than is the school. Media education offers an opportunity par excellence to get ‘in the paint’ with our students, to borrow an expression from the wildly popular NBA. The vast majority of our students are consumers and fans of at least some media texts, and these texts are sites not only of pleasure and entertainment, but also of learning (Giroux & Simon, 1989; Schwoch, White,

& Reilly, 1992; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997). These texts are produced for the most part by a media industry that relentlessly researches its audiences, and that produces a great bulk of material for those demographics including young people that are seen to mobilize spending power in the marketplace. Discussing the cycle of symbolic exchange that leads to youth media consumption, Paul Willis states that “commerce keeps returning to the streets and common culture to find its next commodities” (1990, 19). The point is that commerce does not manufacture youth consciousness, but attempts to harness it. This is how and why Michael Jordan and Nike shoes became so madly popular a decade ago:

Why do kids like Nike “Air Jordans?” Because Michael Jordan is the embodiment of cool, a vehicle for youth dreams and desires. What is cool? Well, that emerges from popular culture.... not as the result of the advertisers’ creative genius but through social practice, be it on the basketball court, in the school halls, or on the street corner, (Hoechsmann, 2001, 274)

Educators like to style themselves as ‘in the know,’ sensitive to and aware of the spheres of influence young people have to contend with, but they lack the resources mobilized by the media industry for extensive grounded research into the lives of young people. (See the PBS documentary *Merchants of Cool* for a description of the lengths taken by industry to identify and assess youth trends: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/>). But this is where taking media texts seriously as windows into the lifeworlds our students inhabit is one of the great potentials of media literacy and media education. These windows open up vistas into multiple worldviews, some that are vapid and superficial, others that are harmful and problematic, still others that are inspiring sites of possibility, and the vast majority that are contradictory and complex knots of meanings in search of a referent.

Media “moments” such as that represented by Bono provide a powerful synchronic snapshot point of view of history as it is lived and felt by young people. Arguably, the Bono moment in youth culture is less pervasive than was the Michael Jordan moment. In “What We Have to Learn from Michael Jordan,” I argued that the Jordan moment articulated youth culture, race and consumer culture in a specific and historically contingent manner. I said:

That moment in history—when globalization, media culture, the fetishization of Afro-American culture, the marketing and popularity of the sneaker, the growth of a new global corporation (Nike), and the need in the United States for a squeaky clean black role model coalesced—will be forever Michael’s. (2001, 269)

In other words, Michael Jordan was, or is, an imaginary version of real social and cultural selves at a particular historical moment, a distorting mirror, but one which tells a story about the state of our culture(s) at the time. The story of Michael Jordan was a powerful one in the circuits of youth culture and arguably one that drew together youth of diverse cultural heritage in a way that Bono never will. But Jordan was not nominated for a Nobel Peace prize; in fact, his reputation is somewhat tarnished, not

only for his brief foray into gambling but for his association with the Nike brand and hence the problems of the underbelly of economic globalization: outsourcing North American jobs and unfair labour practices in Asia and Central America.

It is in these contradictions that some of the most compelling stories for youth lie. Regardless of the popular characterization of North American youth as consumption-mad slackers, driven more by the need to fulfill their self- and group-identities in consumption than to care about their social and environmental conditions, the reality is far more optimistic. If anything, youth coming of age in the information age have access to a broader range of data and opinions about the world than ever before. Examples abound of youth activism, or, at minimum, emergent consciousness, even if some pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes coexist with the same consumerist mentality which is part of the problem to begin with. It is not my intention to paint a romantic picture of an active culture of resistance on the part of youth, but to register some caveats to too pessimistic a reading of the cultural impacts of consumption upon youth. What is required in this context is a more flexible way of conceiving social change, a more inclusive emancipatory agenda which does not turf the uninitiated out on their ears for not living up to prevailing political orthodoxies. For this purpose, I adopt Andrew Ross's term, "impure criticism," to describe an approach that refuses "any high theoretical ground or vantage point" and instead launches itself into the contradictory terrain of everyday life (1989). An impure criticism starts from the premise that people are not mere hostages to a dominant ideology, but that they are knowing and sentient beings who do things for reasons (even if not always for good ones). Impure criticism resists preachy disdain and instead looks for the sites of possibility in seemingly contradictory political worldviews. And here is where a media education agenda fits in.

Young people are learning all the time, inside and outside of schools. Given that they spend many hours immersed in media consumption across varying platforms, it is of increasing importance that this learning be addressed by educators. We worry that they are becoming "vidiots" and audio slaves, hooked on the high of computer gaming and oblivious to the grand silences that informed our learning in university libraries and late nights hovering over our typewriters. David Buckingham argues against a media education approach which positions youth as innocent victims that need to be protected from media influences and rather that we empower young people to read and produce media (2003). Some of the young people we work with are taking this approach without our tutelage in the new Web 2.0 platforms such as MySpace and YouTube. Significantly, TIME magazine named the interactive "you" of the millions who have contributed to the new electronic public spheres as the 2006 Person of the Year. It is the element of play at play in the new media technologies and popular culture of today that can enable a wholesale revolution in the manner in which we view teaching and learning. This is a learn to play – play to learn era, and the young folks who still have a foot in the sand box have an advantage. They don't have to think 'out of the box' because they haven't

yet begun to shut the lid. Those young people with the technological advantage are those with the means (time + money x motivation) to play. The gizmo world we live in is a tinkerer's paradise. Most of the new tools/toys have multiple capacities that can only be discovered by the most dedicated among us. The term "popular culture" is a slippery one, too often used to refer to the artifacts and emissions of the media industries, the products rather than the practices. But popular means of the people. We are constantly making and remaking our cultural selves, one popular step at a time. As John Fiske points out, a CD sitting on a shop shelf is just a media artifact (Border/Lines, 1990/91), a group of people dancing to it are articulating their cultural selves. I use the term articulation in the manner suggested by Stuart Hall: articulation refers both to utterance and making linkage, and in the latter sense articulating self- and group-identity in relation to a broader sense of culture (1986). (The metaphorical root of linkage comes from a British usage: apparently the cab and the trailer of a lorry (truck) are articulated together). If we want our learners to articulate themselves in our classrooms, we need to learn more about what fuels their fires, what drives them and what troubles them.

Ultimately, this is what a cultural studies agenda for media education demands. Cultural Studies, as articulated at the CCCS (Birmingham School) in the 1960s was a form of engagement with cultural processes and historical change. It had emerged from the adult education classrooms of the 1950s and it always had as an underpinning an attempt to engage with the culture of the people—or the moment—without resorting to hierarchization of elite and popular cultures. In "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" Stuart Hall argued that popular culture and high culture were not simple fixed inventories that stand in static relation to one another, but rather the distinction between them and the actual contents of each, were actively articulated in social practice. In other words, these are not distinct registers to which differing cultural practices belong, but ways of categorizing and policing difference, and hence an exercise of cultural power. What counts and what is excluded as knowledge in school and other educational settings mirrors to some extent the patterns of legitimation and exclusion that take place in the culture at large (Bourdieu et Passeron, 1964). It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the broad and multiple set of practices and processes that help to determine how school knowledge is selected, legitimated and institutionalized. The point rather is to underscore the potential for media education and popular culture to modestly destabilize existing power relationships in the classroom, to be a point of entry into discussions that engage matters relating to everyday life in the cultures youth inhabit.

The point is not to glorify popular culture artifacts and practices, to suggest that they could somehow stand in for the inherited curriculum, but just to recognize that they can mobilize the hopes, dreams and fears of the young people in our classrooms. The Michael Jordan and Bono moments represent what Raymond Williams called a "structure of feeling." Or, perhaps they circulate within a cultural moment as resonant metaphors. Williams intended with this term to express something "firm

and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet [that] operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity" (1961, 48). The structure of feeling is "a particular sense of life, a particular community of experience hardly needing expression through which characteristics of our way of life...are in some way passed" (48). It is not "possessed in the same way by the many individuals in the community," nor is it "in any formal sense, learned" (48-49). Rather it is passed down through generations, each of which innovates from the last. Says Williams:

One generation may train its successor, with reasonable success, in the social character or the general cultural pattern, but the new generation will have its own structure of feeling, which will not have come 'from' anywhere. . . the new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, taking up many of the continuities, that can be traced, and reproducing many aspects of the organization, which can be separately described, yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and shaping its creative response into the new structure of feeling. (49)

Williams argued strongly against fetishized, reified stand ins for cultural experience, especially through the commodification of the marketplace: "the strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is [the] immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products" (1977, 128). The packaging of Michael and Bono as products to be consumed gets in the way of seeing them as vehicles for understanding the convergence of certain worldviews, attitudes, feelings and ideologies at a particular historical juncture. But this is exactly why I argue against reading these figures as commodified objects whether as stars, celebrities or corporate pitchmen. Rather, I am making the case that they are simply reflections of our cultural selves and hence symbolic of structures of feeling read against specific historic backdrops.

To undertake a cultural studies analysis on Bono in a grounded manner we have to get beyond Bono's multicoloured shades, his beaten-up cowboy hat and his public performances, both in U2 concerts and on the world stage. We have to consider what he represents, the structure of feeling to which he corresponds. In this light, I argue that Bono is a profoundly contradictory character, that he represents an historical period with no easy answers, an epoch of cultural and economic flux when contradictory worldviews are a reasonable response to social, cultural and economic conditions in which youth find themselves. Paul Willis (1990) speaks of the "necessary symbolic work at play" of young people grappling to make meaning in a period of profound change (1990). Reflected in, and refracted through, Bono, this "necessary symbolic work" of youth identity formation coalesces with the expression of critical youth voice on some of the more pressing social and cultural issues of the day.

In his book *Common Culture* (1990), Willis argues for a conception of media and consumer production that has less to do with DJs and VJs than fans on the street and in their homes. Willis argues for a principle of "symbolic creativity" that involves a bricolage, or mixing, of products and practices, of posters, clothing

styles and musical tastes. It is a creativity in the reception of television and music that eschews a one-size-fits-all interpretation. It is, to all extents, a broad act of reading the popular and the vernacular, a symbolic form of encoding the body, the place one lives and the streets one haunts. Willis is ruthless in his critique of cultural theorists who do not share his vision of a new symbolic creativity alive in all of its contradiction:

Mistaking their own metaphors for reality, they are hoist by their own semiotic petards. They are caught by—defined in professionally charting—the symbolic life on the surface of things without seeing, because they are not implicated in, the *necessary* everyday role of symbolic work, of how sense is made of structure and contradiction. (1990, 27)

Willis calls in effect for a theory of youth writing that is not a literacy as much as a social and cultural semiotic. This approach to youth writing, and the reading of youth writing, offers up for analysis an explosion of youth expression that helps to fill in the gaps missing from more traditional readings and forms of reading.

Reading the contradictions in the lives of youth, and youth lives as profoundly contradictory, opens up a way of seeing young people that is less condemnatory and more forgiving. Ultimately, it is important to mark the uneven development that distinguishes people's mediations with their social reality. An impure criticism must grapple with the contradictions and signal the differences which exist between young people. Perhaps, for example, some youth who are particularly compelled by the circuits of consumer culture have succeeded in foreseeing a future of under-employment in the growing service sector, and are getting the headstart that they will need to sustain the consumer desires which older generations or richer kids have been able to take for granted. Some young people enact performative selves through clothing choices—this might be a hip hop styling, a queer celebratory identification, a grunge statement, or just a working class kid trying to fit in by wearing expensive jeans—and these are entirely expressive choices of style, neither more nor less than body design and performance of identity selves. Whatever the case, it is too simplistic, too deterministic to give up on a generation just because it is buying in, to some extent, to the dreamworld of consumption.

The question arises when reading youth lives whether there is an incipient ethos or politics which coexists with participation in consumer and mainstream media culture. Given the permeation of corporate values into every sphere of everyday life, it is necessary to ask if youth even have access to the language in which they could articulate their social concerns. Of course, the term 'youth'—its masculinist bias notwithstanding—yokes together an enormous array of young people who have diverse experiences and histories. Arguably, young people are highly conscious of the many social, economic and environmental problems they will inherit. The shifting sands of economic fortune in North America create the conditions of possibility for new emancipatory agendas by linking diminishing economic prospects

for young people with the collapsing of the social safety net and environmental degradation. As much as we wish to contest economic determinism, the incipient ethos we are describing is emerging right from under our noses in the mothballed factories, in the specter (or, for some young people, the reality) of homelessness, the rise of terrorism and the resurgence of warfare, and finally in the deceptively beautiful but rapidly despoiling environment.

The problem for educators and cultural workers becomes one of teasing out the incipient critique which is only waiting to be articulated. To ignite the imaginations of young people, or to scaffold their emergent consciousness in imaginative ways, it is important to concede that the rhetoric of social change of an earlier generation does not resonate in the same way today. Without buying in to the dominant narratives of the Left, or the mythologizing of the end a social consciousness somehow tied to the 1960s, it seems nonetheless that we educators cannot simply impose our slogans on to young people. The fire must burn from within emergent consciousnesses and fresh songs and symbols. If educators are to understand the nature of today's contradictory popular politics, in order to engage young people in dialogue, we must be willing to learn. Talking about Bono in the classroom will not solve all of these problems. In fact, for some students, it will appear meaningless and out of touch. Given the fine distinctions made by young people over popular culture choices, and the highly resonant nature of music as a descriptor and symbol of self- and group-identity, Bono's popularity will be limited to only some students. But his performance away from the mic, the stewardship of economic and health issues through some of the world's most important political forums, is certainly worth taking up. And his status as rock star—even among non-fans—would be likely to invigorate debate and study of some of the compelling social and economic problems of the day.

Bono is but one of many media moments worthy of study in media education contexts. The best media education is dialogic and foregrounds the background and experience of the learner (Buckingham, 2003). It is a humbling fact of media education contexts that educators can not know everything and require the active involvement of learners to pursue the multitude of topics that arise in the study of the media and the cultures in which it is situated. Media educators do need to have the conceptual tools to undertake analysis and interpretation of media texts and the sources of media production. As well, media educators increasingly need to have the capacity to produce media of all types though the interesting wrinkle that has emerged as new technologies became cheaper and more accessible is that learners across multiple spectrums began to come into media education settings with adequate or better knowledge bases in production. This too has revolutionized media education settings and unsettled the relationship between teacher and learner. Ultimately, what media educators need more than almost anything else is an open mind and the capacity and desire to read youth writing their lives. It is in reading youth writing the everyday that the pedagogy of possibility grows wings and prepares to take flight in new social futures and new creative lives.

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