LITERACY & IDENTITY

Action heroes and literate sidekicks: Literacy and identity in popular culture

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People spend a lot of time worrying about the effects popular culture may be having on adolescents. They worry that there is too much sex on television and too much violence in the movies. Movie stars and supermodels create unrealistic expectations of body image. Characters who smoke, drink, and use other drugs on the screen make such actions look appealing. Disrespectful attitudes, particularly toward parents and other authority figures, seem to permeate many programs and movies. In short, there is an ongoing and pervasive concern that the representations of people and their actions in popular culture, from movies to television to video games to popular music, will influence the identities and actions of adolescents. Indeed, it seems impossible that the relentless stream of popular culture narratives and images could not have some effect on the identities young people construct for themselves, the ways in which they model their relationships, and the narratives they imagine for their lives.

Although most of us would discount a direct and reductive causal relationship between popular culture and the actions of individual adolescents, that doesn't mean that we are unconcerned about the influence of the images and narratives on the screens that dominate so many teen lives. Even if we don't worry that playing a video game or watching a movie will lead impressionable teens to acts of violence or drug use, we can still recognize that popular culture forms reproduce and distribute the most powerful narratives and iconic images that dominate our lives. The producers of popular culture, in search of the largest audiences possible, draw on the stories, characters, and ideas that they hope will resonate with the greatest number of people. Such narratives and ideas don't create culture from whole cloth, but they do reinforce the ways we all perceive identities and actions in the culture in which we live.

Yet, given the multiple concerns about what is portrayed in popular culture and the power of popular media to re-create and reproduce dominant ideas and images, it is perhaps surprising that literacy teachers and scholars have paid little attention to the ways in which reading and writing are represented in it. Even as teachers worry about the ways that popular culture influences teenage ideas about gender or sexual orientation or race or social class, rare is the discussion of popular culture's role in shaping perceptions of adolescents about literacy practices and about themselves as writers and readers. Although such

representations happen in many popular culture forms, I want to focus, for the sake of brevity, on representations in movies and television programs—representations that raise issues that can be extended to other forms of popular culture.

The lack of attention given to representations of literacy in popular culture may start from a misperception of which movies and television programs contain reading and writing. When I have talked about literacy practices in popular culture, what many teachers think I am talking about are the movies or programs that are set in school or focused on teaching. The same titles come up time and again: *The Dead Poets' Society*, *Educating Rita*, *Finding Forrester*, *Boston Public*, and so on. These programs and movies often focus on literacy as the catalyst to personal growth and public triumph and are certainly worth considering when we think about this issue.

This list of triumph-of-literacy films and programs, however, is far too limited to cover the range of literacy practices actually portrayed on television, film, and in video games. In fact, much of popular culture is filled with representations of people reading and writing. Movies and television programs are filled with scenes of people from all social classes, races, cultures, sexes, and age groups reading and writing. The contexts and the purposes for their writing may vary widely, and the literacy practices may often seem incidental to the central plot. Yet, if you look at how literacy practices are portrayed in popular culture, if you pay attention to who gets to write and read and what effect such actions have on their lives, you begin to see patterns of how literacy is perceived in the culture at large. Such representations hold true in films and television programs across cultural boundaries. If you look at the patterns of literacy representation, you see how those patterns repeat and reproduce dominant cultural ideas about reading and writing in the same way that the unceasing images of armies of supermodels influence ideas of body shape, or that romance narratives influence contemporary concepts of love and relationships.

The question is not whether literacy practices are present in contemporary popular culture; it is much harder to find a movie or program without literacy represented in it than it is to find one where people are reading or writing. The more important and useful question is how do we in the audience interpret the literacy practices we find in popular culture? What do such representations tell us about how we think of the ways that reading and writing construct our public identities?

Patterns in popular culture

When you begin to look for them, it becomes remarkable how many times you see reading and writing in popular culture:

- An attorney on a television drama is handed a document, and she reads it aloud to others in the room.

- A man in a comedy film sits in a huge corporate office typing at his computer while his supervisors complain to him about the forms he forgot to fill out.

- A government agent in a television program types in a password that allows her to download and steal secret files.

- A woman in a movie writes a thank-you letter to a man who has done a favor for her family.

These quick examples are only brief glimpses of the myriad literacy practices that can be seen in movies or television programs. Although the examples I'm using in this column are from U.S. programs, similar scenes take place in popular culture from around the world. Also, the global reach of U.S. popular culture makes the representation of literacy in U.S. movies and television programs an issue that has to be confronted across cultures.

That there are numerous representations of reading and writing in any given movie or television

program may be interesting, but what do we do with such information? After all, outside of triumph-of-literacy stories, literacy is rarely the central concern of most popular culture narratives. Yet the way literacy is portrayed in popular culture does reveal some of the larger culture's common assumptions about literacy and identity in terms of the connections to perceptions of social status, cultural power, and personal relationships. We have long been comfortable interpreting popular culture in ways that illuminate the acceptable and persuasive narratives about many of the ways in which people perform their identities. For example, when we think about the role of women in the workplace we can easily refer to the portrayals of women who are attorneys or detectives in the current television series *Law and Order* or as physicists, doctors, or politicians in recent movies. These images are a reflection of our contemporary ideas about the subject. We can contrast these current portrayals with those of women in the 1950s who were seen most often as secretaries to attorneys in programs such as *Perry Mason* or housewives such as June Cleaver in *Leave it to Beaver*. In the same way, we can look at who gets to read and write and for what reasons to see what concepts of literacy are most acceptable and persuasive in contemporary culture.

I am not arguing for a direct connection between any single scene or group of movies or television programs and the actions of adolescents. I believe, as do many scholars and teachers of media studies, that while the messages and assumptions embodied in films and television programs reproduce dominant cultural attitudes—as can be seen by the conformity in teenagers' clothing choices—it is also true that individual audience members respond to such narratives based on their own experiences, values, and assumptions. Anyone who has stood in the lobby of a movie theater and listened to the withering criticisms leveled at a disappointing film by a crowd of teenagers understands that they do not blindly accept everything they see. It is worth paying attention to how reading and writing is represented in popular culture, but we should not make the mistake in believing that adolescents are simplistic cultural dupes unable to resist any image or message that is portrayed on a glowing screen.

As literacy teachers, then, it is important that we recognize the narratives and assumptions about literacy that our students, and the rest of the culture in which they live, see time and again. Because the representations of literacy practices are often incidental to the central narratives of films and television programs, they are perhaps more likely to be accepted as normal portrayals of behavior and attitudes and pass without as much critical notice. Yet if we accept that popular culture affects the clothes students wear, the music they listen to, and the catch phrases they repeat then we need to consider how the literacy practices they see in so much of popular culture influences how they think about reading and writing before we ever open our mouths in the classroom.

Literacy and action heroes

As one example of the kinds of literacy practices that occur routinely in popular culture, consider the genre of the action film or television program. As Amy Zenger and I have pointed out (Williams & Zenger, 2004, 2007), in movies, including those in the action genre, reading and writing often fulfill established conventions in the narrative as well as serving as markers for the identities of the characters. Taken by itself, each scene or film may not tell us much, but if we look at the common portrayals of literacy in action movies and television programs we can begin to see patterns in the way power and literacy are used (or dismissed), as well as interesting portrayals of literacy and gender.

The action hero is usually capable of reading or writing anything he wants at any moment it is necessary (and, even with a few notable exceptions, action heroes are still usually male). A quick look at a range of recent action films and television programs reveals similar representations, including movie series such as the James Bond, Mission Impossible, Jason Bourne, Indiana

Jones, and Jack Ryan films and television series such as *24*, *NCIS*, and *Lost*. In these movies and programs, and many others, the literacy practices of the action hero often seem effortless. The action hero, while rarely portrayed learning how to read or write, can be counted on to be able to correctly interpret the necessary text at a crucial moment. What's more, of course, is that he often does this under duress or attack, employing his literacy skills to outmaneuver his enemies and save the day.

The action hero's literacy skills are part of his power that allow him to remain in control and always triumph. At the same time, however, the action hero's effortless and always accurate literacy practices often conflict with the conventional and institutional literacy practices of his superiors, bureaucrats, scientists, and, of course, the villain. Routine and conventional literacy practices, like anything else routine and conventional, are disdained by the action hero who must work outside the system to be effective. James Bond films often contain a scene where Bond reinterprets information provided by office files or from a scientist. The system itself, including its literacy practices, proves impotent against the danger, and that's why the action hero must save the day.

The action hero can use literacy at a moment's notice to read a newspaper, book, or computer screen. A common convention of the genre, however, is that literacy alone cannot save the day. In the end, the hero will have to shoot (or impale or immolate) someone. The book by itself is not enough.

Although the action hero can read or write what he needs to when he needs to, literacy is not the primary focus of his power. As the label suggests, the hero is a man of action, not of the more sedate activities of writing and reading. Too much dependence on conventional literacy is not heroic or masculine. Literacy is power, but only to a point.

For this reason, action heroes in movies and television programs very often have literate sidekicks who act as literacy surrogates for the action hero, doing the reading and research necessary to help the hero achieve his goals so he can be free to be a man of action.

Because the action hero usually embodies traditionally masculine characteristics such as physical strength, calmness under pressure, stoicism, and so on, the literate sidekick is often played as a character that is decidedly less masculine. The sidekick may be a bookish and nerdy male (e.g., *Van Helsing*, *Hellboy*, *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, *Independence Day*), a woman, as is the case in a number of the Bond films (e.g., *Moonraker*, *Goldeneye*, *The World Is Not Enough*), or other action films (e.g., *The Peacemaker*, *Top Gun*, *The Mummy*, *I, Robot*, *Paycheck*). Even films with more traditionally masculine literate sidekicks (e.g., *Mission Impossible*, *The Matrix*) still put the sidekick in a supporting role. Television programs such as *24* or *NCIS* also have male action heroes supported by literate sidekicks. On the series *24*, for example, the invincible FBI agent Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland), though capable of reading and writing anything he encounters, often relies on the character of Chloe O'Brian (Mary Lynn Rajskub) back at headquarters to access and relay information for him. While we see Jack in gunfights or car chases, we always see Chloe hunched over her keyboard staring at a computer screen. Although Chloe is often instrumental in providing information to Jack, in the end he must save the world through physical actions. Because the literate sidekick's main power is literacy, he or she can never be more than a supporting player.

The other obvious literacy practitioners in action films are the villains. Villains in action films are often highly literate, but, like literate sidekicks, their literacy often stands in contrast to that of the action hero. In many of the Bond films, for example, the villains are portrayed as elitist, effete, and decidedly unmasculine. Indeed the villain in such films often needs to be highly literate to be taken seriously as a "criminal mastermind." If the villain is not sufficiently intellectual he (and, again, it is almost invariably a he)

cannot be plausibly the head of a large organization with grand plots for world domination (as caricatured so thoroughly in the guise of Dr. Evil [Mike Myers] in the Austin Powers films). But the highly literate villain is not usually a man of action. Instead, he relies on a series of henchmen and thugs to carry out physical tasks. An exception to the reliance on thugs comes in comic book movies, where the villain is often highly literate and intellectual (often a good scientist driven bad by accident or injustice) but has developed superpowers, such as the Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe), or Dr. Octopus (Alfred Molina) in the Spiderman films, or Magneto (Ian McKellen) in the X-Men films.

The portrayal of literacy and identity in action films and television, then, is that while literacy can often come in handy to solve a problem, in the end it is unmasculine, unheroic, and, when the chips are down, unnecessary. What's more, those who are most gifted in their abilities to use literacy, the action heroes, employ it effortlessly and with no need for learning or struggle. Like their extraordinary good looks, literacy seems to just be a fortunate accident of birth. In fact, institutional literacies from bureaucrats or scientists are often shown to be incorrect or narrow-minded.

Identity and popular culture in the classroom

Representations of literacy and identity in popular culture are, of course, not limited to action movies. Issues of social class, gender, race, and culture come up in different, compelling, and often disturbing ways on television and in movies (Williams & Zenger, 2007). Regardless of the portrayals, it's not hard to see how such a set of literacy practices, repeated over and over again in popular culture, can begin to reinforce narratives about literacy and identity that may run counter to what we hope to accomplish in the classroom.

One of the most successful classroom uses to which I have put representations of literacy in

popular culture is to simply bring in several media examples of reading and writing that occur and ask students to pay attention to who reads and writes and for what purposes. Sometimes I use a series of scenes from different James Bond movies that show his disdain for institutional literacies. Or I might use a scene from *24* in which Jack Bauer is aided by Chloe O'Brian and then another from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in which Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) is the action hero who, even though female, disdains literacy and is helped by her more bookish literate sidekicks Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan) and the librarian Rupert Giles (Anthony Head). By using these scenes, I can demonstrate how such representations can transcend even the gender of the main characters. Or I might contrast different movies or television programs that offer divergent concepts of literacy practices and identity. For example, I might begin with a scene from *Shakespeare in Love* that shows William Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes), inspired by newfound love, racing to his desk to write in a single draft the lovely language of *Romeo and Juliet*. This is a common representation of the writer—a genius inspired by a muse and able to pour his soul onto the page in a flood of spontaneous love or sorrow. (And if this scene were not enough to get that idea across, I could find other examples in films such as *Finding Neverland*, *The Hours*, or *Sylvia*.) I would contrast this with a scene from a film such as *Office Space* in which workers toil unhappily at their computers in gray cubicles. Literacy in *Office Space* is a dreary and oppressive practice, and no one seems to be inspired by reading or writing or creating works of genius on the page. From these films, I can engage students in questions about who we consider to be a "writer" or a "reader." Why is the inspired genius such a common representation of those who write fiction or poetry? In what circumstances is literacy portrayed as a means of punishment or threat? Often after watching scenes such as these, students begin to make connections to them or use them as examples in their literacy narratives.

Another assignment I use is to ask students to watch a number of movies or television programs and keep a log of every time a character reads or writes. We then bring those logs into the classroom and look for themes, contrasts, and tensions in the representations of literacy and identity. I ask students to rewrite scenes, changing the identity of the character or changing how the literacy is used, and then we talk about the effects of such changes.

The most important idea I pursue with students is how they situate themselves in relationship to the identities they see portrayed in popular culture. I want them to think carefully about the myths and realities of literacy. I want them to consider whether their experiences and goals for reading and writing are similar or different from the narratives about literacy that get repeated in popular culture. It is not necessary that they adopt or reject the literate identities they see in movies or on television, but it is vital to me that they become aware of the identities and of the expectations they create about literacy in terms of gender, social class, and race. It is equally important to me that students think carefully about how they construct their own literate identities. For as much as we would like it to be, life is not always like the movies. And perhaps that's not such a bad thing after all.

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