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American Idols in Film

BY RICHARD VAN HEERTUM AND KIP AUSTIN HINTON

Making the short video documentary, Deconstructing the Superhero: American Idols in Film, on the politics of superheroes was a whirlwind experience. We learned filmmaking techniques while expanding our analysis of popular culture, especially in relation to media constructions of masculinity. Research was situated within the historical context of film studies and included interactions with a diverse range of students and faculty, both inside and outside of the classroom. Our own film combined short interviews with students, framed by a longer interview with Emeritus Professor John Lawrence, who has written extensively on the role of superheroes in American culture. We then juxtaposed these interviews with clips from a number of recent superhero films. Our documentary thus not only offered an entryway into video/ filmmaking techniques but it also encouraged a more critical view of media itself.

This experience has greatly contributed to our growth as cultural critics and as engaged pedagogues; we have employed methods of critical cultural studies and media literacy and the theories and practices we learned in the class in our own publications, teaching, and research projects. Richard, for example, is currently co-editing a book Hollywood's Exploited: Public Pedagogy, Corporate Movies, and Cultural Crisis (Palgrave, December 2010) that looks at various identity markers and their relationship to filmic representation. He completed two chapters for the book, one on the death penalty and film and

the other on representations of social class in three contemporary films set in Boston. He has also completed a chapter for another book analyzing the relationship between irony, youth culture, and The Daily Show and The Colbert Report. Kip's dissertation research is on a video-editing class for farmworker students; several of those students' films were accepted for screening at the 2010 California Association of Freirean Educators Conference. Kip also presented on critical media literacy during the Social Justice Seminar at the 2010 American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting in Denver.

As shown by our own academic experiences, a theory-and-practice course connects students to a critical media literacy agenda. Students develop skills in deconstructing media texts, which can in turn empower youth to produce their own media (Kellner and Share, 2007). Given that the majority of students in our class were women and people of color, we found ourselves in a minority position, which allowed us to better understand and explore different standpoints. With the encouragement of Dr. Hammer and other students, we decided that an exploration of representations of whiteness, masculinity, and democracy, as depicted by the majority of superheroes in film, would allow us to understand this form of popular culture in a dialectical fashion.

We began the video documentary, Deconstructing the Superhero: American Idols in Film by asking why superhero films are so popular. Students offered a number of perspectives,

but they centered around the genre's "macho" nature (in an arguably increasingly emasculated world), heroism (in a world where heroes and positive role models are harder to find), pure entertainment value, ability to do things humans cannot, and sense of nostalgia. Superhero films, as many experts argue, instantiate our desire for a pacified world where fear and uncertainty are confronted by the outside hero (Jewett and Lawrence, 1977). This is often based on a nostalgic 1950s–style utopia that builds strong audience affiliation to traditional gender roles, innocence, and exceptionalism as traditional American mythology.

We next explored the relationship of superheroes to religion, in a section subtitled "Jesus in Tights?" John Lawrence pointed out the proximity of the superhero to a secularized version of the New Testament, with a savior from beyond coming down to rescue earth from iniquity and evil. This is clearest in Superman, the story of a boy from Krypton sent to Earth by his parents just as their planet is about to be destroyed. His parents make the ultimate sacrifice, sending their newborn son to earth to rescue humanity, with his Hebrew name of God and constant references throughout the films to the biblical line "the son becomes the father and the father becomes the son" (Kozlovic, 2002). Lawrence points out that these are "smash-mouthed Jesuses" who use violence to exact their definition of justice–the destruction of evil and restoration of law and order.

This relates closely to our next theme, the relationship of superhero films to democracy.

Umberto Eco (1979) once argued that Superman is a conservative figure whose role is to restore rather than transform the social order. This is true of most superhero films from the Spiderman series to those of Batman and even Wonder Woman. In all cases, they take on some threat to society and, by defeating it, restore order to the community–never actually challenging society to change. As Lawrence and Jewett describe it, these films fall under the rubric of the American monomyth (1977, 2002), an escapist fantasy where a generally solitary, violent individual, or small group saves a community from some great evil–betraying the ideals of democratic responsibility and participation, of reasoned and intelligent debate and of reins on power. Redeemer characters are the only ones who can save society from danger or evil (often embodied by corrupt or inept politicians, bumbling police and federal agents and the collapse of the other social institutions entrusted to protect us). While none of the male or female students we interviewed ever thought about the underlying politics, we argue that these films are subtly powerful ideological instruments that, among other things, offer anti-democratic messages against collective action or social change. Instead, an outsider comes in to save society from some peril, often tied to contemporary fears like global warming, technological hegemony, terrorism, or simple greed, and restores the current order of things – legitimating society as it is, rather than as it could be. This is backed by the passive nature of the rest of the characters in these films, who tend to be victim-

ized or watch the action from near or far. Lawrence calls this a form of "spectator democracy," where we look to a patriarchal figure, like Bush post-9/11, to restore order and save us from forces beyond our control.

We conclude our film by exploring more transgressive or democratic possibilities of the films. As Monika Messner argues: "with its themes of xenophobia, alienation and ambiguity, Bryan Singer's X-Men transcends the classical superhero movies, demonstrating a social consciousness and calling attention to racial and sexual inequality" (2002, p. 226). Even in Superman Returns and recent Spiderman films, we see scenes where Lois Lane and her new husband, doctors, or the crowd help a superhero under attack by their archenemy. Lawrence pointed out that this might relate to a post-9/11 world, where there is interest in real heroes like policemen and firemen and we see the limits of an all-powerful figure fighting an evil that is diffused and hard to define.

While we managed to communicate complex ideas in our film, it was not always a smooth process. We had no experience operating the camera or positioning people and objects to get a good shot. We were not immediately successful at recruiting and prepping interview subjects. Documentary directors need a certain amount of self-assuredness, and it took us time to figure out how to appear competent. Footage originally perceived as great revealed its flaws only in editing: odd lighting, poor sound, or a distracting pattern on a shirt.

The editing process itself was an even bigger hurdle. Even with effective hands-on instruction, the time and meticulous detail involved in cuts, transitions, and shot selections were overwhelming to us as novice filmmakers. Though student appropriation of movie clips is legal under fair use (Hobbs, Jaszi, and Aufderheide, 2009), the conversion and manipulation of commercial DVD clips was time consuming and difficult. One computer crash destroyed an entire day of editing on our first film (this is not unusual or unique, and others in the class lost even more work). However, a crash can be a blessing in disguise—assembling a sequence the second time was always faster and usually better. In the end, we had to tag-teamed the editing with our classmate Brian Trinh for 24 hours to complete the final cut on time.

For the two of us, the deconstruction of ideology and the deconstruction of the filmmaking process have proven invaluable. Like a superhero story, filmmaking can be either democratic or authoritarian. Media production is not seamless or direct – it requires critical literacy about layered processes, which makes it an ideal context for teaching and learning. Overall, we gained valuable skills for the future, as we continue our own quest for truth and justice . . .

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