Handbook of Public Pedagogy
Education and Learning Beyond Schooling
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Unmasking Hegemony with

Publication details
Robin Redmon Wright
Published online on: 09 Dec 2009

How to cite: Robin Redmon Wright. 09 Dec 2009, Unmasking Hegemony with from: Handbook of Public Pedagogy, Education and Learning Beyond Schooling Routledge
Accessed on: 18 Oct 2023

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In this chapter, I emphasize that people learn from popular television no matter what the intent of the writers, producers, actors, commercial sponsors, or audience. Just as teachers teach as much by example as by implementing lesson plans, television fills our imaginations with information and models—for good or ill, whether intended or not. While I can recall very little factual information from my K-12 schooling, I can detail the storylines from many of my favorite television shows during the same period. Growing up in rural Appalachia, I found that television, together with literary fiction, poetry, and rock ‘n’ roll, offered glimpses of a larger world missing from the brutally boring days of school, especially high school. What I learned from television has stayed with me because, as Jenkins (1992) explains, popular culture fans “read intertextually as well as textually and their pleasure comes through the particular juxtapositions that they create between specific program content and other cultural materials” (p. 37). So I learned to dress like Rhoda (Mary was too establishment), imagined myself as a Police Woman working for social justice, and practiced Cher-style sarcasm, in the all-White, working-class world that constrained me. Inspired by books, music, and television, my imagination enabled me to experience new possibilities and, unbeknownst to me at the time, to equip myself to challenge dominant ideologies.

The intensity of those lessons continues to inform my work as a critical educational researcher and educator. So when I stumbled upon a television program from 1962—The Avengers—featuring a character—Dr. Catherine (Cathy) Gale—who was a feminist, a scholar, and a judo expert, I couldn’t help but wonder about its impact on the women who watched her in the early 1960s. Did they find themselves incorporating those possibilities into their developing identities and/or resisting the dominant gender constructions of the time?

In this chapter, I discuss popular television programs as art forms with the potential of becoming public pedagogies of resistance. Based on research into women viewers’ responses to...
the 1962–64 Avengers, I discuss television’s capacity to encourage what Marcuse (1978) called “rebellious subjectivity” (p. 7) and resistance to hegemonic constructions of gender identities. Marcuse believed that certain artistic experiences position us outside everyday life and proffer an estrangement from cultural assumptions, thus opening up the possibility of political critique.

A Brief Description of Cathy Gale

Cathy Gale, played by Honor Blackman, was a woman decades ahead of the world inhabited by most women in 1962. Initially, Blackman played the part as it was written for her male predecessor Ian Hendry who, in the 1961 inaugural Avengers, had portrayed Dr. David Keel, co-lead to Patrick Macnee’s character, John Steed. When Blackman replaced Hendry in 1962, several scripts had already been written for the two male leads, but the low-budget constraints of the show dictated that those scripts be used before new ones were commissioned. Rather than paying to revise the scripts, Dr. David Keel was simply replaced with Dr. Catherine Gale. Later, when writers began writing for the character of Cathy Gale, to maintain character consistency, story editor Richard Bates directed the writers “to see Cathy’s role as though she was another man” (Rogers, 1995, p. 49). This had the effect of making many of the character’s actions androgynous. As Bates explained to Rogers (1995): “the characters of Steed and Cathy were so interchangeable that I often took scenes which were written for Macnee and simply changed ‘Steed’ to ‘Gale’. These were played by Honor and we never had to change a word” (p. 49).

The character of Dr. Cathy Gale evolved with a PhD in anthropology, a black belt in judo, an expertise with firearms, and an adventurous past (Miller, 1997; Rogers, 1995; Soter, 2002). The character’s androgynous nature was further enhanced when she was dressed in black leather from head to toe for all fight scenes, which Blackman, herself a brown belt, always acted. Leather clothing had emerged in association with men who “enjoyed covert masculine contact that was very physical, very rough, and often very erotic, but not always sexual, and not ever female” (Fritscher, 2008, p. 217). The result of the character’s actions and attire was a gender deconstruction that hit with a gale force (as the character’s name was created to imply). Cathy Gale blew through British living rooms and stormed across viewer imaginations, leaving a debris trail of battered oppressive devices of gender conformity.

The Avengers in this early incarnation, shown only in the UK, was a dark, gritty crime drama in “the realist lineage of the spy thriller” comparable to “Hollywood film noir” (Chapman, 2002, pp. 66–67). Dr. Gale was a sharp contrast to her contemporary female counterparts in action crime programs who were “symbolically subservient, policewomen...knocked to the floor by a bad guy [or] pulled from the floor by a good guy; in both cases, women [were] on the floor in relationship to men” (Tuchman, 1979, p. 531). She was the intellectual and physical equal to her male co-star. According to Andrae (1996), “The Avengers refunctioned the patriarchal discourse of the spy genre, transforming woman from an object of male desire into a subject who possessed ‘masculine’ power and independence” (p. 116). The disorienting factor that intensified the radical nature of Cathy Gale’s representation lay in the indisputable fact that Honor Blackman is a very beautiful woman.

A detailed description of the series can be found in various publications (Chapman, 2002; Miller, 1997; Rogers, 1995), but I strongly recommend viewing the DVDs that have recently been made available. They are, in my opinion, an entertaining counter-narrative of resistance to the hegemonic forces that constructed and constrained most women’s lives in 1962. In an interview with Honor Blackman in 2006, she told me that the writers, producers, and actors had not intended to inspire women to change the direction of their lives. However, she went on to recall women who wrote her to say “good on you” and who told her that they had “started doing all
sorts of exciting things” once Cathy Gale “broke the boundaries of what they considered women capable of.”

Television as an Instrument of Public Pedagogy

Moores (2000) argues that television audience research needs to broaden its focus to include “the practices and politics of cultural consumption” (p. 117). I argue that educational research should do the same. Brookfield (2005) discusses Marcuse’s views on how adults learn to free themselves from dominant ideologies:

> When adults experience deeply and powerfully a work of art such as a play, poem, picture, song, sculpture, or novel, they undergo a temporary estrangement from their everyday world. This estrangement is disturbing in a productive and revolutionary way. It opens adults to the realization that they could reorder their lives to live by a fundamentally different, more instinctual ethic. Marcuse called adults’ development of a new sensibility “rebellious subjectivity.” (p. 54)

For Marcuse (1964), immersing oneself in art offers a way to separate oneself from the entrenched attitudes and language that manipulate our thoughts and, in Habermas’ (1992) terms, invade our life-world. Marcuse (1978) defines art as “high culture” and sees popular art forms such as television and popular music as “low culture,” unable to evoke rebellious subjectivity and functioning solely as tools of repressive capitalist hegemony. For Marcuse (1964), popular media forms “blend together harmoniously, and often unnoticeably, art, politics, religion, and philosophy with commercials [to] bring these realms of culture to their common denominator—the commodity form” (p. 57). Art is thus incorporated into the market by the “neutrality of technological rationality” so that it “serves the politics of domination” (p. 80).

Furthermore, Marcuse (1964) argues that popular media is one of the most pervasive means of conveying what he calls “the authoritarian ritualization of discourse” (p. 101). This ritualized discourse “pronounces and, by virtue of the power of the apparatus, establishes facts—it is self-validating enunciation…it communicates decision, dictum, command” (p. 101). In this way “language controls by reducing the linguistic forms and symbols of reflection, abstraction, development, contradiction; by substituting images for concepts” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 103). Moreover, television often allows “no time and no space for a discussion which would project disruptive alternatives” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 101). This suppression of critical thinking leads to what Marcuse (1965) calls “repressive tolerance” (p. 102), the “passive toleration of entrenched and established attitudes and ideas even if their damaging effect on man and nature is evident” (p. 85).

While I agree with many of Marcuse’s observations, particularly the idea that much popular culture promotes repressive tolerance, I disagree with his quite traditional view of art as “high” art—artistic efforts created, experienced, or contemplated in complete isolation—and removed from popular consumer culture. In his view, consumers of popular art forms are passive absorbers of hegemonic messages with little power or agency to resist or negotiate meanings. I view popular culture’s influence in a more Gramscian (1985) construct—as a potential space for the non-elite, the working class, to imagine scenarios of rebellion and to redefine their identities. Like Gramsci (1985), I view popular culture both as a potential space for resistance of, as well as a tool of oppression by, the hegemonic forces of globalized capitalism.

I believe Marcuse underestimates the power of creative inventions like popular fiction, cult television, rock and roll, and hip-hop to “contain more truth than does everyday reality” and to construct an “illusory world [where] things appear as what they are and what they can be”
Robin Redmon Wright (Marcuse, 1978, p. 54) just as powerfully as “high” art. I argue that mentally removing ourselves from peers, family, and environment by intense interest in a mode of popular entertainment offering images of alternative realities allows us to contemplate the possibilities represented by those alternatives. Some popular culture can, thus, offer possibilities for resistance, for the crafting of the “liberating subjectivity” that is crucial to the development of a revolutionary consciousness.

Of course, what can be learned from even the most subversive creative endeavors depends on the intersections of the learner’s positionality, her receptiveness to alternative realities, and the concomitant political and social environments. Many other factors, such as the opportunity to discuss her budding liberatory imaginings with critical educators, activists, or what Gramsci (1971) called “organic intellectuals” may be required (p. 340). While the benefits of experiencing any art form in isolation may have a degree of merit, the voluntary servitude and mass stupefaction induced by the current hegemony of consumerism and nationalism may necessitate critical pedagogical discourse to encourage radical thought.

With this caveat in mind, I argue that popular art forms can liberate viewers from a priori thought and the resulting “intensification of perception can go as far as to distort things so that the unspeakable is spoken, the otherwise invisible becomes visible, and the unbearable explodes” (Marcuse, 1978, p. 45). Armed with Marcuse’s ideas of repressed tolerance and rebellious subjectivity together with an expanded definition of “art” as a theoretical backdrop, I next discuss the results of my research into what contemporaneous women viewers learned by immersing themselves in the cult TV classic, *The Avengers*.

**Methodology in a Nutshell**

*Gale:* You know, it’s an ironic theory of yours, that arming for World War III is the sole security against it.

*Steed:* So long as the arms race goes neck and neck.

*Gale:* I don’t think anyone would dare start another war and risk the reprisal.

*Steed:* Someone will certainly try. History’s full of people who’ve tried to get away with it.

*Gale:* We can’t go on arming forever!

*Steed:* (ignoring her desire to discuss nuclear weapons escalation) Biscuit?

*Gale:* (dismissively) No, thanks!—“The Nutshell” 1963

As the snippet of dialogue above indicates, Cathy Gale, a widow, social activist, and humanist, voiced the rising doubts surrounding Cold War rhetoric and the arms build-up of the 1960s. Cathy often criticizes the conventional espionage-speak. What Steed flippantly terms “assassination,” she pointedly calls “murder.” She is openly oppositional to established ritualized discourse. Feminist media scholar Leisbet van Zoonen (2000) argues that “the pleasures popular culture offers to women may be seen as a potential source of subversion...[or they] may be used to realign oneself with dominant identities” (p. 150). *The Avengers* provided fodder for both, offering viewers multiple positions on issues simmering under the surface of “proper” 1962 England. Van Zoonen (2000) insists that textual analysis alone is insufficient as a method of audience research. Instead, researchers should examine how audiences engage with and within social and economic structures, investigating “how they make meaning of them, how they adapt to them and through which tactics they try to subvert them” (p. 107)—precisely what I sought to know about Cathy Gale fans. As I collected women’s stories, I focused on how these women integrated their fascination with a television character into their adult identity development, how they made meaning of Blackman’s *avant-garde* performance, and how they developed a rebellious subjectivity through the experience.
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The Data Details

Seventeen women answered my call for participants in a study of what women learned from the first feminist on television. To find women who watched Cathy Gale as young adults or late adolescents when the series aired from 1962–64, I sent the call to colleagues and acquaintances in the UK; posted it on several internet sites; emailed it to an older women’s feminist group meeting at an elder-care facility in London; and talked about it at conferences. I was delighted to find 17 lifelong fans willing to talk with me. In an effort to contextualize their responses, I collected copies of reviews, contemporaneous issues of magazines like the UK’s TV Times, and numerous other magazines spanning 45 years featuring interviews with Avengers actors, writers, and producers. I also obtained several rare issues of an Avengers Fanzine called On Target published during the 1980s by Dave Rogers. Over the course of 28 months, I collected over 65 such artifacts for analysis. I also interviewed two scriptwriters for the Cathy Gale episodes and Honor Blackman herself.

As preparation for my trips to England to conduct interviews, I viewed all 44 Cathy Gale episodes for textual analysis (Stokes, 2003). That analysis informed my reading of the women’s stories and helped with interpretation by providing context. In addition, I viewed all 137.3 surviving original series episodes (1961–1968) to put the Cathy Gale block into the proper Avengers context. Finally, I watched all available episodes of contemporaneous British spy dramas like DangerMan, The Saint, and The Prisoner as well as episodes of the gritty police drama, Z-Cars in order to locate The Avengers within the context of other spy/crime dramas airing on British television.

Stories of Dr. Gale’s Public Pedagogy of Resistance

The full results of this 3-year project are described elsewhere (Wright, 2007a, 2007b; Wright & Sandlin, 2009); however, this chapter’s focus is specifically on women viewers’ internalization and incorporation of Cathy Gale’s performance of resistance to hegemonic constraints on gender roles. All 17 participants insisted that viewing the Cathy Gale Avengers changed the trajectory of their lives and made them imagine futures quite different from the ones they had been conditioned to accept. The forces of repressive tolerance were pervasive in their lives. But, by immersing themselves in their admiration for Cathy Gale, they developed a rebellious subjectivity that helped them begin to strip away the bonds of that repression.

Cathy in Hegemonic Context

The modern British feminist movement originated in opposition to the governmental and social backlash designed to re-domesticate women after World War II. While women’s work outside the home was demanded during the war, Britain’s government sought to return women to the domestic realm during the years that followed (Lewis, 1992). England’s population was decimated during the war. A move to “rebuild the family” began as politicians focused “on the issue of ‘adequate mothering’ as the surest means to securing future social stability” (Lewis, 1992, p. 11). Experts had predicted that by the year 2000, “the population of England and Wales would be reduced to that of London” (p. 16) if families did not procreate rapidly. Britain feared losing its status as a world power. Marrying and reproducing were tightly manacled to nationalism. As children of the 1940s and 1950s, young women watching The Avengers in 1962 were fully entrenched in the hegemony of that constructed gender dichotomy.
Cathy in Popular Context

The study participants recounted stories from their lives in 1962 that fit with the expectations described above. They were expected to marry, have children, and nurture both husband and children for the good of the crumbling empire. Some of the participants were married, some were engaged, and others harbored fears of spinsterhood. None described themselves as being content with the expectations of a life of subordination to husband and children. Thusly situated, they turned to television for entertainment and escape.

Unfortunately, the dominant ideology of sexist hierarchy was overwhelmingly reinforced in popular media. Liz, a participant who reminisced about several action dramas showing at the time, summed it up:

Police and spy shows were really popular at the time. I suppose it was the Bond influence. There was Z-Cars, Dixon and the like, and then there was Danger Man… I particularly remember that the women in that show were horrible. They were usually vacuous blondes that the plot poked fun at or they were truly wicked. There were no women like the hard-working women I knew.

This was a mantra repeated by the other women in the study. They all had some version of Julie’s lament that all other women in movies and television were pathetic women that “fell over when the wind changed… that was the other role model, pathetic creatures that needed help… Women were not doing things. She [Gale] was the only one.” Indeed, there were few women on the small screen, only one in five lead rolls, and most of those were in comedies. There were even fewer women in dramas and none of them were in lead roles (Miller, 1997). Most were subservient, needy, and weak, often victims of violence or the butt of sexist humor. If a female character were strong, she had to be wicked, wanton, or a complete wastrel.

Dr. Gale, Professor of Female Resistance

While women recounted various lessons learned from watching Cathy Gale, none was more powerful than the idea that resistance was possible. Participants in this study told me repeatedly that, before Cathy, they “had never imagined” the simple concept of resisting culturally constructed gender roles. Mezirow (2000) posits that imagination is essential for learning to take place. One must imagine a different way of being before the possibility of a perspective transformation can emerge. All 17 participants described scenes of not just imitating Cathy but, as one woman put it, “internalizing the essence of the character” and openly resisting authority figures intent on enforcing conformity to traditional gender expectations. Watching Cathy live an independent, fulfilling, socially conscious life, with no interest in domestication, allowed them to imagine themselves differently.

Camille put it this way, “I could see, but I couldn’t see until I saw Cathy Gale and recognized myself in her.” Another woman, Rosemary, agreed: “Cathy Gale taught me new visions of myself. Before her, I looked in the mirror and saw Edward’s future wife or Father’s daughter. Watching her revealed to me a real person in the mirror. I was astonished!” A self-described “shopkeeper,” Rosemary, a lesbian, along with her long-time partner, owns and operates a thriving antiques shop in an artsy borough of London. Listening to her happily describe her transformation from doormat to dynamite, I shuddered to think of her succumbing to the pressure and becoming “Edward’s wife” four decades earlier. That pressure to marry (and, of course, to reproduce) was a prevalent theme with all the women.
Female subservience was an integral part of the hegemony. Three of the participants were transwomen (male-to-female transsexuals). The transwomen, biologically male when they watched Cathy in the 1960s, understood clearly what was expected of women. They spoke of lessons in resistance to those expectations learned from Cathy. China described her fear of becoming “the wimpy little woman—the little washer” after transitioning. She went on: “I thought I might have to give up who I am and that’s not the point, you know what I mean? I’m a transsexual because I needed to be the person I am inside—a woman.” But her concept of womanhood had little to do with the dominant ideological concept of women as domesticated nurturer. China went on to explain, “Honor Blackman is like me. She’s always been very fit and very powerful—I realized that power is this inner space and being, which is what she was showing us as Cathy Gale.” What all of the participants in this study discovered in themselves is what China described as “power” in one’s “inner space and being.” Chris described it another way, “She’s a very female woman, Cathy is, but nobody messes with her if she looks them in the eye and has that certain way of standing.” She stood up and illustrated—pelvis thrust forward, hand on hip, one eyebrow raised. Watching her I recognized the personification of Marcuse’s “rebellious subjectivity.”

Honor Blackman, at age 80, told me that she is delighted that women were inspired by and learned from her characterization of Dr. Catherine Gale. While Blackman is humbly dismissive of her influence, she recognizes that Cathy “really was the first woman on television to ever be the equal of the man.” She admits,

Men always said, “women can never be good at it [physical aggression and self-sufficiency]; they’re not sufficiently strong.” Then if you find somebody like I was who, in fact, can use the aggressor’s strength against him, then well, the last bastion fell.

The bastion didn’t fall of its own accord, Blackman grabbed it, dropped to the ground and, with a hearty stomach-throw, tossed it into a growing heap of post-colonial, imperial garbage. It has become a habit with the actor. In 2002, the Queen offered Blackman the title of Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE). She refused (Galton, 2004). Most of the participants mentioned that recent rebellious resistance to monarchy during their interviews. It delighted them that Honor Blackman, a long time political activist, refused to accept the CBE. China emphatically stated, “I wasn’t surprised. It’s that edge—that fearless edge—she’s not afraid of what people think. Not even the Queen!”

The Inevitable Pushback

The women who learned from their engagement with The Avengers recounted stories of the inevitable struggle that results when people refuse to conform to the expectations set for them by family, church, and dominant ideologies. They told of family fights and long-term estrangements, of extreme financial difficulties stemming from withdrawn familial support and the low wages women earned, and of dissolved marriages and romantic relationships. Some admitted slipping back into the role of dependent, passive, “behaved” women at times, only to resist again more adamantly. The acquisition of a rebellious subjectivity was sometimes a struggle against men who were accustomed to controlling them. Blackman described the intensely personal effect her portrayal of a feminist character had on some male viewers who wanted to force her to conform, to recognize male superiority. Most men and many of the women viewers clung to their repressive tolerance of the cultural myth of the “naturalness” of dichotomous, hierarchical gender stereotypes. Blackman recalled, “Quite a few men, when they’d had a few drinks, would try and call me out for a fight…and then they liked to try to mock me, because
I really unnerved them.” Her husband at the time, Maurice Kaufmann, confided to a reporter in 1963 that men seem to resent the way Cathy Gale can take care of herself. It takes away their male ego. They identify Honor with Cathy Gale so they take it out on her. And she always rises to the bait and gets aggressive back…. With us, it’s the husband stopping the wife having a fight—not the other way around. (Weaver, 1963, p. 14)

Many resisted Blackman’s characterization of a powerful woman. Yet the women who talked to me never lost the knowledge they gleaned from Cathy Gale. Several of them remain estranged from their immediate families because they resisted the sexist and imperialistic hegemonic manipulations deceptively labeled “tradition” and deemed natural by generations of repressive tolerance. But these women remain liberated in the fullest sense of the word.

**Cathy’s Significance to the Discourse on Public Pedagogy**

How can the results of this research inform educators and activists who are interested in practicing a pedagogy of resistance to the repressive tolerance that permeates popular media? According to Porter and McLaren (2000), television programs provide one of the most popular forms of entertainment today…television shows amuse, shock, sadden, and excite us by turns. Television does more, however, than entertain. Television shows are cultural products, and as such they reflect, reinforce, and challenge cultural ideals…. Television acts as a mirror and a model for society. In examining and coming to an understanding of the cultural messages and popular appeal of certain television shows, we come to understand something about the society that has created and sustained them. (p. 1)

We may also come to understand how those cultural messages can be subverted, critically evaluated, and exposed. Just as Cathy Gale was the vehicle for the self-knowledge that study participants needed to resist gender oppression, popular television programs can sometimes encourage resistance that promotes change. With most media outlets owned by five major multi-national corporations with interests in expanding capitalism, in numbing consumers into becoming automaton shoppers, and in promoting repressive tolerance, it is important to realize that “culture can be, and is, used as a means of resistance, a place to formulate other solutions. In order to strive for change, you have first to imagine it, and culture is the repository of imagination” (Duncombe, 2002, p. 35). Whatever the intent of its creators, popular entertainment will sometimes be fodder for learning and acting resistance.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Nine rings were gifted to the race of men who, above all else, desire power. —J.R.R. Tolkien

Cortes (2004) insists, “Audiences learn not only from programs and publications intended to inform but also from media presumably designed merely to entertain (and make money)” (p. 212). Critical educators cannot ignore popular television entertainment as a significant site for a public pedagogy of resistance. While much of what passes for entertainment on television appears to be amoral, vacuous, and in the case of the proliferation of cheap reality shows, examples of social Darwinism, some programs also address issues, challenge stereotypes, and
offer viewers means to recognize oppressive tolerance. They can expose the “token of a false concreteness” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 174) of political, social, and religious rhetoric. The results of this study show that these programs represent popular art’s potential to liberate viewers by offering alternative interpretations of social, cultural, and political apparatuses. I will conclude this chapter with an example from an *Avengers* episode from 1964 that, I believe, broaches questions still relevant today.

The episode is called “The Wringer” and illustrates what can happen when government becomes compartmentalized, operates without commitment to clear ethical standards, and is subject to the coercive tactics of manipulators of political power driven to reinforce the position of entrenched power elites. Written by Martin Woodhouse and directed by Don Leaver, the story could have been written about contemporary U.S. politics in that it describes a situation with Steed’s intelligence service that is eerily similar to the CIA’s recent practice of extraordinary rendition. *Extraordinary rendition* (or simply *rendition*) refers to the transfer of an individual suspected of criminal behavior from one country to another for purposes of arrest, detention, or interrogation (Garcia, 2009). Beginning in 2002, the CIA set up a secret program whereby captured terror suspects were taken to other countries (such as Egypt and Morocco) and subjected to harsh interrogation and torture (Frontline, 2007). These secret jails, known as “black sites,” are located in countries where torture is routine. Once the suspect is rendered into the custody of those operating the black sites, then interrogation proceeds without benefit of the laws and stated ethics of the U.S. government. Without access to legal counsel, without the protection of *habeas corpus*, and without access to judicial process, suspects may be held—and tortured—infinitely (Frontline, 2007). Through rendition, government officials are able to construct cover stories with plausible deniability—such as the claim that assurances were given by dark sites administrators that suspects would not be tortured. But even former CIA officials have admitted that such claims are worthless (Frontline, 2007).

In “The Wringer,” a fellow agent named Hal Anderson accuses Steed of being a traitor who caused the death of six undercover agents. Given only an informal hearing by his supervisor, Charles, with no lawyer, no trial, and no opportunity to prove himself innocent, Steed is sent to an isolated prison in the Scottish Highlands called “The Unit.” Here agents who have “outlived their usefulness” are imprisoned and interrogated. The Unit is run by a disturbed man nicknamed The Wringer who has been given complete control over his prisoners. He is aided by an equally disturbed sadist named Bethune. In complete isolation and lacking oversight, the two have decided to experiment with the discarded agents and to sabotage the Service by turning agents against each other. Viewers quickly learn that Hal had been tortured and brainwashed into believing a manufactured case against Steed, and the agents he accused Steed of betraying had been brainwashed into killing one another.

Meanwhile, Cathy Gale is questioning Charles at every step of the way. She points out, “You’ve broken the rules.” Charles’ telling response: “They’re our rules. We make them and occasionally break them. That’s our privilege, Mrs. Gale.” When she argues with Charles’s assistant Oliver that they have only “second-hand evidence” (Hal’s accusations), he replies in an eerie foreshadowing of the Bush administration:

Oliver: It’s an ugly trade. Its rules are not those of justice but of expediency.

Cathy: Everybody’s guilty until proved innocent?

Oliver: Precisely.

Their excuse for turning justice on her ear is the safety of their operatives and, consequently, the British people. The compartmentalization evident in recent U.S. political events is also reflected in Charles’ response to Hal when he asks what will happen to Steed: “The disposal of agents
who have outlived their usefulness is not a matter we concern ourselves with.” Hal nervously mumbles, “You hear rumors of this…disposal, the dump…” He is in obvious mental distress. Viewers are realizing that he has been convinced of Steed’s guilt during two months of torture and brainwashing at the hands of The Wringer and Bethune. But as a long-time friend of Steed his mind, at last, is beginning to question.

Given the traditional gender roles on television in 1964, there are several remarkable deconstructions of those roles throughout the episode. In one memorable scene, Cathy is contacted by Charles early in the morning as she arrives home from an all-night party. She hurries to his office dressed in a full-length, black leather dress and explains that she had just gotten in and didn’t bother to change. Whether Charles is stunned, pleased, or both is difficult to ascertain. But as she debates with him, his wrinkled white suit and her sleek, sophisticated, smooth black attire almost become characters in their own right, and it is glaringly obvious which is the most powerful.

Steed is blindfolded, drugged, and transported to The Unit. Cathy protests, asking Charles, “What if you’re wrong?” Charles calmly insists, “We’re never wrong.” She continues to argue that she be allowed to see Steed, and he finally relents. Cathy is determined to rescue Steed because she knows him to be innocent. Once she arrives at The Unit, she finds Steed in a substantially weakened state, both mentally and physically. He has been subjected to sleep deprivation, alternating sensory deprivation and overload, with sounds and images meant to confuse and disorient.

As Cathy plans and implements their escape, and in a dramatic reversal of typical television rescues, Cathy shoves Steed to safety as bullets begin to fly and even takes a bullet in her shoulder that was meant for him. The resolution of the drama comes when Steed finds Hal Anderson and fully convinces him that his memories are false, and that they have both been the victims of an unethical, immoral, and unsupervised secret government agency. Back in London, Cathy confronts Charles telling him: “Steed was nearly half-killed and I got shot doing your job for you.” The job of properly, legally, and ethically overseeing the treatment of prisoners has been ignored, and people died as a result. “The Wringer,” an artistic creation from survivors of the Blitz and citizens of The Cold War, is a prophetic indictment of the practice of extraordinary rendition.

Bourdieu (2001) argues that culture is being assailed by “logical monstrosities” in the “ram-pant doxa of neoliberalism” in our popular media whose rhetoric is filled with “normative observations” (p. 79). This “doxa” acquires “the quiet force of the taken-for-granted” (p. 78). Crucial to Marcuse’s (1964) concept of repressive tolerance is the implicit assumption that everyone’s ideas carry equal weight in a democracy so that when oppositional views are expressed, but then immediately dismissed and ridiculed by pundits posing as journalists, viewer-consumers are persuaded that the most reasonable position has prevailed. This manipulation was evident in the absence of mass public outrage over U.S. policies of rendition, torture, and dismissal of habeas corpus.

While the mainstream media and the culture conglomerates of the motion picture and television industries work to stifle critical reflection, The Avengers is an example of how the creative arts also offer possibilities for representations that question and resist the assumptions embedded in political, journalistic, and cultural rhetoric. Unlike Newitz (2006) and van Zoonen (2005), I am not convinced that a great many of our popular cultural products offer these possibilities. Yet as this research indicates, the powerful pedagogical potential of those few popular cultural artistic ventures that manage to question “normative observations” and the “doxa of neoliberalism” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 79) offers educators tools that can be used to “project disruptive alternatives” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 101), that may unmask hegemonic oppression and begin to liberate
potential. Contemporary British science fiction television programs like *Doctor Who* and its anagrammed spin-off *Torchwood* certainly offer alternative possibilities for human interactions and accepted value systems. Their lead characters care deeply about humanity and their concept of humanity is supremely inclusive. Cult TV favorites like *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are centered on questioning assumptions and confronting authorities. To deny the pedagogical impact of these cultural products on people is ethically and professionally negligent. The public pedagogy of popular culture is pervasive and powerful. To ignore it is to miss educational moments when we might use the undeniable pleasures of popular culture to propose disruptive alternatives and promote liberatory learning.

Notes

1. Only one act of three from "Hot Snow," the pilot episode with Ian Hendry and Patrick Macnee, survives. All but two of the videotaped episodes from 1961 have either been lost or destroyed.

References


