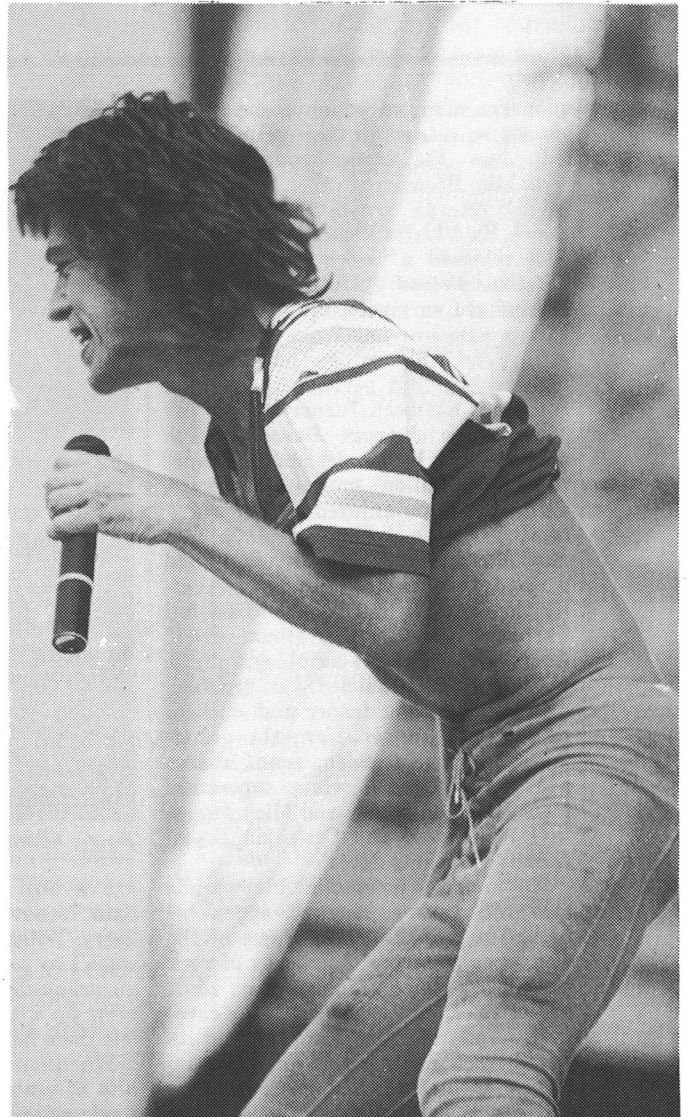


# WORKING WITH MEDIA IN THE CLASSROOM



Tina Turner



Mick Jagger

Credit: Neil Preston/Camera 5

Credit: Brennan/Outline

## Melodye Lehnerer

*À partir de ses expériences comme mère de famille, enseignante, et étudiante, Melodye Lehnerer examine comment les média populaires (surtout le film, la télévision, et les vidéos-clips) peuvent être employés comme ressources pour l'éducation des étudiant(e)s en matière de représentation des femmes.*

Popular media is not the enemy: it can be a valuable classroom tool. This classroom tool not only tells us about ourselves and our society, it suggests alternative selves and societies. This

knowledge of what is and what might be can serve as a backdrop for classroom discussions which develop critical thinking.

These observations are the culmination of experiences I have had as a teacher, a student, and a mother of two teenagers. These experiences have been tempered by my schizophrenic feminism. Depending on the issue and my personal involvement with it, I fluctuate between liberal, socialist, and radical. But no matter what feminist perspective I have taken on an issue, I am always guided by the overriding principle that *feminism means the freedom to choose.*

And it is the freedom of choice which brings me to the classroom mainstreaming of popular media. Whether it be of images, sounds or words, the current trend in media analysis is to eliminate choice. This elimination frequently comes under the guise of education. For example, Project P, a division of the Toronto Metro Police, sponsors an educational video presentation of pornography. This video presentation, limited to eighteen-year-olds and above, supposedly illustrates Canadian community standards. These standards are heterosexual and Victorian. If placed on videotape, masturbation is just as

obscene as bestiality and just as illegal. The effect of such "education" is to imply that something as personal as sexuality can be objectively measured and then politically labelled correct or incorrect. I do not adhere to this "banking deposit approach" which assumes the student to be a receiver of information and the teacher to be the giver of information. Rather, I adhere to the "problem-posing" approach which assumes that teacher and student are constantly exchanging information. This exchange is particularly relevant when one is dealing with popular media. The key role of the teacher in this exchange is to facilitate — not dictate.

Facilitation can be accomplished effectively by following four basic steps:

- view, read, or listen to what you are talking about.
- present at least two alternative ways of analyzing it.
- listen to and incorporate within the class study what students have to say about the form of popular media being analyzed.
- use the knowledge base established in the first three steps to conduct a class dialogue on popular media.

My examples will draw upon my experience with visual media — film, television, and music videos. Any manifestation of popular culture — fashion magazines, beer advertising, tabloids — can be approached in the same way.

The first step — to view, read, or listen to what you are trying to understand — is a must. For example, let us assume that you and your class are going to look at images of women in music videos. Do not start out with a "ready made" interest group tape (that includes yourself). View music videos in their "natural" context in order to establish a common experiential base:

- If you have television in your school, have the class watch at least thirty minutes of unedited videos.
- If you do not have television in school, tape at least thirty minutes of unedited videos at home and have your class watch the tape.
- If your school has a specific policy against doing number two above (educational exclusion is still being debated across the country), have your students watch thirty minutes of videos at home and document what they see. You may want to use a simple form which covers name of video, name of artist, type of music, and a brief description of the video. Also to be included in this form are commercial breaks, interviews, and "VJ on air talk." Adapt this assign-



Cyndi Lauper

Credit: Costa Outline

ment to your specific needs — English, journalism, social science, etc.

In step two introduce other ways of looking at music videos. This is best done in one of the following ways:

- Rent an educational package, such as the video program "Rock Videos: Much More Than Music," put out by Media Watch. Do your homework on this piece and make clear to your class what the producers' guidelines are for selection of material.
- If you are lucky there might be a popular show — *Man Alive*, *Speaking Out*, *Phil Donahue* — which has a program devoted to music videos. Either have the class view it (not during school hours) or make a tape of it to be shown in class (during school hours). In order to find out if and when such a program will be on, establish an information network with other teachers. In addition put students on alert and have them put their parents on alert: the snowballing effect of such a network to acquire information and get others involved in the process will amaze you.
- Make a tape of videos which visually depict points you want to make. This tape will be highly selective. Be open and honest about the criteria you used to select the videos. For example, if you believe them to be sexist, define your terms and your criteria. Do not assume everyone knows the meaning of such terms as sexism, sex role, gender role, stereotypes, degradation, or women as objects. Nor should you assume they know how these might

look visually. Be specific with your examples!

- Have students make a tape (or a written description) of a video they might want to discuss. As with your own tape, have them make clear to you and the class why they wanted it viewed. Encourage your students to look for positive as well as negative imagery. In this part of step three it becomes the responsibility of the students to introduce their knowledge of videos.

It is in the fourth step that the crucial difference between "banking deposit" education and "problem-posing education" becomes apparent. Based on four weeks of establishing a knowledge base, you and your class have to determine: (1) if there is a problem with respect to images of women in music videos; (2) if there is an alternative problem concerning the analysis of images of women in music videos; and (3) how best to resolve the problem(s) you have discovered together.

To clarify how "problem-posing" works, I will relate an incident I experienced as a guest at a Metro high school. I had chosen two videos, "My House" by the Mary Jane Girls and "I'm So Excited" by The Pointer Sisters. In both videos women were shown bathing, preening, and presenting "come hither" body gestures. I suggested to the students that this was visual stereotyping of women. The class immediately began to disagree with me. Their first point was that the video by the Mary Jane Girls placed them in a context of isolation from men — in a condominium on the beach. The lyrics made it clear that they were waiting for men to join them and that they were willing to grant their many needs. By contrast, the Pointer Sisters were getting ready to go out — not only to meet men but to be with other people. Their video depicted the preparation and expectations of anyone getting ready to go out. The lyrics clearly stated "we'll have a good time," not *you'll* have a good time. In the video the Pointer Sisters fully expected not only to give but to receive attention from the men. The perceptive points made by these students were based on their everyday experience with videos: acts always occur in the context of the video. If you isolate them, you alter the meaning.

The class made one last point which must be acknowledged in any discussion of popular media — they liked the Pointer Sisters because they were a "class" act. They did not like the Mary Jane Girls. Whenever possible, have



students critically examine something familiar to them. It is easy to examine the exotic and then ignore the insights. This problem, inherent in "banking deposit" education, will not occur if you have maintained an "exchange" approach. Your aim is reflection, not rejection. The group needs to discover the problem, not be given it.

The problem with music videos might not be the easily-identifiable stereotyping in the Mary Jane Girls video but rather the realistic depiction by The Pointer Sisters of getting ready to go out. It is in the presentation of self that gender roles prove to have such a powerful hold on our identities. What is it about initiating relationships that makes us more conscientious about the "presentation of self?" The answer might be found in a very different kind of video — Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time." As an image of women and as an artist in the context of a video, Cyndi Lauper presents an alternative to the gendered self. In "Time After Time" she alters her looks to suit herself. This new, playful self at the same time questions socially acceptable gender roles. After initially rejecting her appearance and her behaviour, her boyfriend finally acquiesces. The alternative image presented by Lauper is an alternative to the polished "sexy" look of both the Mary Jane Girls and The Pointer Sisters.

The real problem with the study of popular media is that we, as educators, overlook these alternative selves and only focus on the stereotypic selves. By focusing on one and ignoring the other, we become eliminators and so stifle the liberating potential of education.



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