When Rubber Meets the Road: Exercises in Media Literacy

Typical American adolescents of today have been growing up in a commercially- media saturated world. Since they were toddlers, they have been exposed to numerous (if not millions) of images and messages in some form of media. Some of these messages have been great, some have been good, some of them questionable, and some of them bad. Certainly, they are capable of telling the differences. However, are these students aware of all they are listening to? Do they spend time thinking about why a commercial made them feel or think a certain way? Are they aware of any influences it could have on their own lives? Do they notice if any of their choices as consumers, or "aesthetic tasters" are individualized and unique or, like a magazine ad, just mass produced?

Adolescents are children developing into adults. Psychologists have studied this age group extensively as they are the most curious and baffling age group of all. The major area of development is that of their identity. Psychologists agree that identity is the most important aspect of adolescence. During this stage, the body and brain are in a growth spurt. Each student can be at a different level of brain maturity at this time. Some of them are quite capable of abstract thought, and others who are the same age, aren't quite as developed yet. While these changes are going on, they are grappling with identity issues such as who they are vs. who they want to be. Many adolescents want to be unique and special from the crowd, yet they find great comfort in blending in with their peers. Not many are willing to gamble on trying to be extremely different and risk being ostracized. Herein lays the paradox: the preciousness in creating one's identity, while remaining in the comfort zone of some conformity (Steinberg,

2008).

As an American citizen with the freedom to become who you want to be, identity development is important and glorified. However, like the rest of the world, parents and peers are the most influential catalysts. Secondary influences are the environment and the culture. America's culture is centralized around electronics and the media. Even our religious traditions and national holidays are commercialized and idealized as part of popular culture. Many (if not all) family traditions include items from or participation in popular culture. Therefore, it is almost natural to conclude that the first and secondary influences on a person's identity are intertwined.

The media and the Internet (social websites like Facebook) have become common place for most UK and American adolescents. A recent study (2006) of 19 different schools in the UK, found that consumption (buying power) is central to forming an identity. Many of adolescents' personal relationships are made through the possession of [popular] objects. Adults today can judge this as a superficial reality. Nonetheless, it is a very popular and important way for these adolescents to explore identity (R. Croghan et al., p.463).

The young people that were interviewed in the UK are not much different from the adolescents in the USA. Their social caste system is mainly identified by what clothes they wear and music they listen to. These "style groups" are often the makers of friendship groups. Across the different localities of this survey and between the different schools- there were variations in the names and styles of clothing that particular groups wore (for example, in the USA we typically call groups "populars" and "in-betweens" and over there it is "trendies" and "greebos"). The associations with key items of clothing (styles and labels), and to a certain extent the music that each group listened to was the same (Croghan, 2006, p. 466).

But the search for authentic identity and the security in belonging to a group doesn't stop once you have the right clothes. Many adolescents are constantly under reconstruction and having to negotiate whether or not they or another member actually belong and can be classed in a particular style group. Style decisions are associated with particular identities and these identities have both positive and negative connotations. Most of the time, adolescents will construct positive positions for themselves and negative positions for others. Any style has moral identifiers with it. And as if it were politics, young people will try to avoid too close an alignment with particular style groups. "It is not just a question of having the correct commodities, but of establishing a right to wear them. This is illustrated where a mixed-gender group of eighth graders recognized that the same clothes could be criticized when worn by an unpopular person and praised when adopted by a member of a popular group. Members of the popular group thus policed and maintained the exclusivity of group membership." They will undermine each other (2006, p. 467)!

As an art teacher, thinking that I would be able to work with helping youth in constructing a more positive and healthy approach to identity labels seems like waging a war that I can not win. In short, it seems plausible to step in and have an assignment that identifies materialism as shallow and meaningless in the end. I could hope that many of them would realize that there are more important qualities for a human being to possess and then act on it. But to an eighth grader, these things might seem like the end — all. And unless you can change the minds of the majority, then the "train" isn't going to stop.

Another largely important part of identity is what goes in those clothes: A body. Sigmund Freud states that a clear personal identity is strongly based on a healthy ego. A healthy ego defines and drives the individual, and it develops

initially through satisfaction with the body. "Put simply, the more the adolescent is satisfied with the human body and able to use this to mediate successful social relationships, the better the adolescent develops as an individual and the happier they are" (Price, 2009, p.38). As social beings, we are reliant on the approval and support of others. Our perceptions of the body are built around life experiences where appearance is commented on. Price, a nurse says, "Incrementally, ideas about the body start to shape perceptions of the self and influence our opportunities to build and sustain happiness. These are matters of more than passing interest to nurses, as mental wellbeing of adolescents is important, both as part of growing up and when dealing with illness or injury" (p. 39).

Not only are clothes important in forming identity, but the body is objectified, too. That is, the body is ascribed a status that is supported by social norms. Most often the social norm for young women's bodies is to look as thin as the models on TV and in magazines. Rather than explore the diversity of body shapes and the range of norms, the adolescent accepts that there is only one standard that should be ascribed to, and her body is then measured against this. The adolescent embarks on an emotionally difficult journey of either trying to adjust the body so that it fits expectations or insulating herself against criticism through association with others of a more tolerant disposition (Price, p. 41).

What I can do in my classroom is lead discussions and create projects that challenge the norms that might be so unrealistic. I believe that helping adolescents to find healthy body image is important to their self-esteem.

I was inspired by reading an article by June Bianchi. She is an art education professional that has done a collaborative project (among students in England and New York) called, More than a body's work. This project was an opportunity for hundred of young people from very diverse cultural experiences

(from schools, colleges, youth organizations, artists' groups, community groups, as well as youth with limited access to cultural capital, such as teenage mothers-to-be, the disadvantaged and socially excluded), to come together and create art works (images, poetry, or music) that supported expressing meaningful ideas about their own identities in relation to personal and socio-cultural influences. This active participation engendered a sense of respect for participants' verbal, visual and written contributions. It generated higher levels of self-esteem. The feedback and evaluations from others across the project indicated that many who had previously been excluded from mainstream education experienced a sense of value, success and a heighted belief in their own potential (Bianchi, 2008, p.305).

This workshop that she has designed included a format based on identification of significant typologies that lead to the construction of image and appearance:

- Perceptions of beauty and its ideal
- Concepts of normalization and difference
- Gender identity
- Sexuality and sexual orientation
- Alternative aesthetics: sub-cultures and the transgressive body

During the workshop, participants analyzed many artists' process and practice in relation to typologies of appearance. A questionnaire focused on key issues, inviting participants to contribute ideas and observations in relation to their own experiences within the following areas: (p.296-7)

l   How significant is the body and visual appearance in constructing identity?

l   What processes and practices do individuals employ in creating visual identity?

l   What are the main influences in constructing appearance?

l   How influential are regional, national and international media in generating typologies within youth culture?

I am not sure how readily some of these topics could be discussed in a public school system, let alone during school hours. There would be censorship on things like these. But I still find them important and valid to the American youth today. In particular, a project like this would be an excellent opportunity for all types of youth to be a part of. It would help educate one another about stereotypes and hopefully bring about more tolerance and flexibility to their attitudes about acceptable identities. As for those who look at the final works; they too may understand and discover identity challenges that they or someone they know have personally experienced. Art works like these can bring out productive dialogues.

Another art instructor was researching the spiritual meanings of art in the lives of adolescents. ("Spiritual" meaning that the artist understands the connections between self and other, self and world, and self and community.) The projects were on a similar theme (the inner struggles of an emerging Self). It provided the students with "another language to explore and express feelings and thought, when possibly other forms of communication are inadequate" (McPhillips et al, 2007, p. 244). As McPhillips et al. claim,

To understand or to relate to the artwork engages the whole body in a process of which only some aspects might be rational or intellectual. Perception then is not a one way or simplistic act of looking; rather it provides the ability to make a meaningful connection with self, other, object from which neither will emerge the same. It also calls for the acknowledgment that there will be aspects of self and other, that are imperceptible, but no-less still present. Each artist understood a deep truth about connection, that it is a struggle of the self to connect the forgotten and despised aspects of other within, as much as to connect to an 'other'

person. This struggle is spiritual, is divine, in that we are called to know the horizons of our being, and to see the perfection of self and other (pp.245-6).

In conclusion, the art room can provide a place for adolescent students to work constructively with ideas and media materials that relate to identity. The major goal of all educational institutions is to prepare the student for the world outside. Critical thinking is important to an individual's success in making the best decisions for their future. If the students are made to examine all the "layers" within a media product, then they will be able to decipher what is good for them and their identity. I believe this is the major component of "media literacy."

This is why I titled this curriculum, When Rubber Meets the Road: students need more guidance in understanding the major influences that media and popular culture has on their identities and lives as consumers. Media literacy will also be beneficial and necessary for students that wish to pursue a career in art and/or media productions. The more exercises that they have in thinking about all the layers of messages and images, the more equipped and prepared they will be to make the best decisions for themselves — and not just to follow the crowd.

References:

Bianchi, J. (2008). More than a Body's Work: Widening Cultural Participation through an International Exploration of Young

People's Construction of Visual Image and Identity. International Journal of Art and Design Education. 27(3), 293-308.

Croghan, R., Griffin, J. H., & Phoenix, A. (2006). Style Failure: Consumption, Identity and Social Exclusion. Journal of Youth Studies.9(4), 463-478.

McPhillips, K., Mudge, P., & Johnston, J. (2007) Shifting Selves: the Struggle for Identity and Spirituality in the Work of Three Young Women Artists. International Journal of Children's Spirituality.12(3), 233-247.

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Steinberg, L. (Ed.). (2008). Adolescence. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Title: "When Rubber Meets the Road"

Curriculum Theme: Exercises in Media Literacy

Teacher: Anne Hemphill Carr

Grade Level: 9-12 grades

State Fine Art Goals: Observation skills: Critically analyzing design and content

State Language Arts Goals (if any): Journaling responses (personal and/or fact)

General Goal:

Adolescence is a tender time of development for personal identities. Growing up in a society with media-saturation has its downfalls. In particular, latest studies prove the influence media has on adolescents' opinions. These lessons are intended to help the students better understand the subliminal messages in media and advertisements, and how companies successfully or unsuccessfully convince the consumer. This will help them to make the best choices for themselves. The ultimate goal could be that the lessons will create a classroom environment that is nurturing to their personal needs in the development of their own identities.

Lesson title (name each lesson to reflect a general unit theme)	Visual Exemplars (list specific images and artists, TV shows, and/or books that you plan to use for each lesson)	Motivation / dialogue (list basic issues and questions to be explored during classroom dialogue and any other motivational strategies that you plan to use for each lesson)	Media / process (list artistic processes that your students will engage in during each lesson)	Concepts and/or design principles to be learned during each lesson	Closure (list an assessment strategy that can be used at the end of each lesson)
Lesson (class period) 1 **"Product Concept"**	**Various magazine advertisements** that include products that will appeal to: 1. a girl, 2. a boy, 3. an adult, 4. a child, 5. and one that is neutral.	Discuss what the product is and how the company designed the picture to sell it. Did it use humor, fantasy, guilt, or another type of pleasure? Did it use an attractive person? If so, then who is this person representing? What is the intent- to allure you into thinking _?__ about this product?	Prepare for these lessons by having students bring in **magazines from home or from business offices.** There needs to equal representation of the types of magazines (for children, teens, boys, women, men, and general audiences) Allow time for them to find at least 5-10 advertisements that they are willing to share and discuss.	Noticing/focusing on the elements/content (people, places, and things) that are included in the advertisements, as well as the text. Art vocabulary: pick out composition strategies, and the elements and principles of design.	Student will pick 5-10 advertisements from magazines and attach them in**sketchbook**. Students will write short answers to a set of questions for each picture. (see**attached questions for products vs. concept**)
Lesson (class period) 2 **"Public Spaces, Private Faces"**	Prepare for class by making a **big space on the wall** (4 feet wide or more is desirable). The advertisements that were used for discussion during lesson 1 will be posted on the wall of the classroom. This will be the start of a collaborative collage. Use **rubber cement or pushpins**, so that they are easy to remove and rearrange as needed.	Review what was discussed in lesson 1, and have the students share the advertisements that they found and put in their sketchbook. Show them the wall space that will be used for collecting very good, very bad, or very interesting (in some way) advertisements. This space could be used for an entire semester or school year. Demonstrate the approach to craftsmanship by trimming the magazine pages and using the glue sparingly.	The students will either use the ads they found in lesson 1, or find new ads to display on the wall. Encourage equal representation of what they may select. This way you will have a wider variety of topics to talk about. (This is why it's so important to have a wide variety of the types of magazines.) *Teacher: Note any mentions of TV commercials that can be used in the future discussions via Internet, YouTube, etc.*	After everyone has contributed to the wall, discuss the ads that are presented. Using the **When Rubber Meets the Road questions**, ask if they are considered, good or bad. Ask them why they are interesting. Point out the "eye- popping" successful uses of the elements of art and principles of design. Then ask if any of them could have a **more personal meaning** to someone. Are there **subliminal messages or extra thoughts and feelings**that are residual from any of the advertisements?	Assess that all students have participated in contributing to the wall as well as in the discussion. There should be ample opportunity for responses and flexibility in the possible answers. Also, have students answer the questions (to Lesson 2) next to ads they have in their sketchbooks

Lesson (class period) 3 **Art History: Andy Warhol and Desensiti-zation"**	Show examples of his celebrities from a span of 30 years. Excellent additional resource for lesson plans on Andy Warhol: http://edu.warhol.org On Jackie Kennedy: http://edu.warhol.org/ulp_hcc_hm_s5.html#jackie Powerpoint presentations: http://edu.warhol.org/20c_ppt.html website information gathered on 12/5/2009	Talk about his explanation of why he chose objects and people from popular culture and his intent/message to the viewer about why he made his work: Mass media was desensitizing our emotions and de-humanizing the celebrities. Make a list of commercials, logos, and celebrities that we see in the media on a [daily] basis.	Students will take notes using the **Artist Research Questions**. The students will find an example of a current company/product/celebrity in the magazines and attach it to their sketchbooks.	Researching and identifying Andy Warhol's artwork and the purpose behind it. Discovering on their own what images they experience readily. Perhaps it's something or someone that **they have become desensitized to**— and unaware of such a thing.	Check to see that the 5 questions are fully answered. Review in class if necessary. Have each student share the picture that they found (that Warhol could easily use today).
Lesson (class period) 4 **"Getting Personal: Stereotypes and Idealized Beauty"**	Show the making of a fashion commercial or picture for a billboard. (Example from the Dove Soap company-"Evolution"http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYhCn0jf46U) And "The Photoshop Effect" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YP31r70_QNM The spoof on Dove Evolution:http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0u0wWOMIsE Website information gathered on 12/3/2009	After viewing the videos, have the students look over at the ads on the wall that include models and people. Investigate any possible use of Photoshop manipulation. (Again, this is why it is so important to have a variety of magazines, so that many ages and possible races can be found.) Take a few minutes and allow them to look through one magazine to find "flaws" or "untouched photos".	With found images, and**sharpie markers**, have the students comment and draw arrows/circles to areas of the face/body that have been retouched. Allow students the space to comment or vent. This might be a "deconstructive" time.	Not an artistic concept, but a psychological one. The awareness of our popular culture's *ideal beauty* and what technology will do to trick us for the sake of a "nice picture" effects. This challenges their own concepts of beauty and/or reality — especially to those that are sensitive like adolescents (most especially the girls).	Attention to videos, and participation in finding examples on the wall and a new one in a magazine with comments written on or beside it.